A Heroine of Charity

by Kathleen O'Meara

A Heroine of Charity

by Kathleen O'Meara

The most disastrous epochs of the world have often been productive of its grandest characters, and the very excess of crime and suffering in a generation, appealing to these valiant souls, has stimulated them to efforts and sacrifices some times heroic and fertile enough to change, as by miracle, the whole face of the age. Never, perhaps, was this truth more forcibly manifested than in France during the early part of the seventeenth century, when the country, a prey alternately, sometimes simultaneously as during the rebellion of the Fronde to war, foreign and civil, famine and the plague, was continuously drained of its vital resources, and when even the spiritual life of the people was starved by the decay of ecclesiastical discipline, and their faith jeopardised by the irregular lives of the clergy. It was a time for both the Church and the faithful to send up incessantly that cry of a grand soul of our own day, “Send us a saint, O God! send us a saint!”

Many did, no doubt, utter the cry with pure hearts and persevering fervour; and it was answered with magnificent mercy in the coming of Saint Vincent de Paul.

When “le bon Monsieur Vincent,” as he was called by his countrymen for over sixty years, came to Paris after that adventure amidst the galley-slaves that forms the one chapter of divine romance in his lowly career of quiet miracles, he found the capital in a lamentable plight. The “good city” had, not long before, opened its gates to Henri IV; and, although it was supposed to have then entered on a reign of repentance and prosperity, its condition was such as to be in many ways little short of barbarous, compared with our present standard of civilization. Vincent was stricken to the heart by the spectacle of spiritual, moral, and physical misery which the brilliant capital presented to his compassionate eyes. Pauperism always has been, and

always will be so long as the world lasts, no doubt; but if it constitutes in our own days the sin and the shame of our great rich cities, it is at any rate the object of wise and humane and effective legislation; the poor are looked upon as a suffering class, to be helped and healed, and the rich feel and practically acknowledge their responsibility towards them. But when Vincent de Paul came to Paris he found the poor regarded and treated as enemies to be warred against, and noxious vermin to be exterminated. The Gospel was, no doubt, “preached to them”; but here the message ended; no care was taken to give light to the blind, or limbs to the maimed, or to raise to life those who were buried in a living death of vice and physical degradation. Lazarus sat on the steps of Dives, and only the dogs came to lick his sores.

The kings of France, following the example of the Sovereign Pontiffs, had laboured through succeeding reigns, more or less earnestly, towards suppressing, at least partially, mendicity in the kingdom;. but so far their efforts had been vain. The evil grew till, in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was strong enough to elude the combined legislation of the Church and the State, and had become a national peril as well as a social pestilence. The beggars formed a state within the State, organised them selves into corporations, and, placing themselves outside the law, lived in open defiance of it. Brittany was one of their strongholds; they held their States-General there in a place called Pre-aux-gueux (the Beggars Meadow); and in the fourteenth century they elected from amongst themselves a king, who was recognized by the beggars all over France, and whose ninety-second successor represented this curious hereditary royalty so far on as the seventeenth century. In the reign of Louis XIV the beggars in Paris alone numbered forty thousand, exactly one-fifth of the population. They were a formidable danger to the metropolis, baffling all efforts of the police to keep them in order, and constituting

a permanent threat to the lives and property of the citizens. It was chiefly after dark that they plied their trade, sallying forth from their dens armed with murderous weapons, and with a total disregard of human life. Their business was also diligently carried on in the daytime, but rather by practices of clever and systematic fraud than by means of the ruffian violence which accompanied it by night. Every evening, when their day's work was done, the beggars congregated in centres which they called Cours des Miracles, in blasphemous parody of the words of the Gospel, “Behold, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk.”

In these courts, of which there were eleven in Paris, transformations were indeed effected which might well pass for miracles in the eyes of the uninitiated. Cripples who had gone limping all day on one leg, maimed and deformed children, hunch-backs, invalids who had excited loathing and pity by exhibiting the most hideous ulcers and wounds, etc. all on entering the “Court of Miracles” underwent a sudden and complete metamorphosis; humps dropped off, absent legs and arms appeared whole and active, ulcers vanished, and the sick and maimed became instantaneously sound and straight.

The Abbe Maynard, in his exhaustive biography of Saint Vincent de Paul, describes one of these dens of lawlessness and vice. “It consisted in a large square, and a crooked blind alley, foul and dense, a sort of paupers metropolis in the centre of the capital of Christian civilization, or rather a sewer and sink of Paris and of France. In order to reach it you had to wade through a labyrinth of filthy, dark, cut-throat lanes, and then plunge into a long and winding descent. This brought you to ten mud-houses sunk deep in the ground, and in which some twenty families wallowed, huddled up with innumerable children, who were either illegitimate or stolen. The whole made a population of five

hundred families, being about three thousand inhabitants for this one court of miracles. Neither police nor bailiffs could venture within the precincts, for they were sure to be met with stones and blows. It was the abode of brigandage and corruption, flourishing with entire impunity, a reservoir of all the vices, the school of every crime. . . . The beggars acknowledged no faith and no law, and yet they believed in an Almighty Power. At the end of the court, in a large niche, was a picture of God the Father (stolen, no doubt, from some church), before which they said some prayers every day! This worship, however, in no way influenced their conduct. . . . They were literally a people without a God or a king, without laws human or divine, without creed or morals; knowing neither marriage, nor baptism, nor sacraments; bound to the Church, the State, and society solely by incessant warfare."

Such was the condition of the beggars in Paris when Vincent de Paul appeared, a heaven-sent messenger raised up to their relief and that of the great city in whose heart they dwelt, festering like a gangrened wound. Vincent was the son of a peasant, and had learned by that best of teachers, personal experience, how to feel for the sufferings of the poor, while the charity which had driven him to change places with a convict chained to the galleys had brought him into closest contact with the most wretched and degraded amongst criminals. He knew their vices and their temptations as few honest men ever come to know them, and he pitied them with the compassion of a heart that was Christ-like in its love for God and man. He had inaugurated a glorious reform in the French clergy by the foundation of the Mission. Inspired by his spirit, its members were changing the face of France and carrying the Gospel all over the world. But other saints had worked wonders in the same line before him; Saint Dominic and Saint Ignatius had baptized and converted men in hundreds of thousands; they had

made conquests to the faith of their Divine Master which later saints might emulate, but which it seemed almost impossible they could surpass. The great and unique vocation of Vincent de Paul was to be of an altogether different kind; he was to be in a special manner the apostle of the poor; he was to pity their physical .sufferings, to labour for the alleviation of their human lot, as no saint had ever yet done. If one might venture to say so bold a thing, no saint ever so closely imitated the human side of Our Lord's character as Saint Vincent; no saint ever so resembled Him in being pitiful over the bodily afflictions of men, their diseases, their hunger, their sufferings from want of the necessaries of life, as Vincent de Paul did. And again, no saint ever so generously imitated Our Lord in publicly associating women with his apostolate. His mission was essentially a mission of charity, of mercy to the suffering and the afflicted, and he had not gone very far in its fulfillment when he saw that the co-operation of woman was absolutely necessary for its perfect development, and he called her to his aid, and gave her full share in the glory of the sowing and the reaping. He had proved himself a father to all the sinners and sufferers; but with that sweet instinct of human pity for human pain that sets him apart amongst the saints, he soon discovered that these poor forsaken ones needed something more than a father: they wanted a mother; they wanted the tender touch of a mother's hand, the incomparable compassion of a mother's heart. He looked around him, and his eyes fell upon Louise de Marillac.

The De Marillacs were a fine old family, that for many generations had counted distinguished members in the military and civil service of the State. M. de Marillac, the father of Louise, had two brothers Louis, Marshal of France, and Michel, Keeper of the Seals both high in popular esteem and in royal favour, and both destined to excite thereby the resentment of Richelieu, and to fall victims to his implacable

jealousy. M. de Marillac's wife, Marguerite de Camus, belonged to the noblesse de robe, as the dignitaries of the bar were styled. She died when Louise was still a child, and M. de Marillac, fearing the effect of his own over-indulgent fondness and the atmosphere of political excitement which filled his home, sent his little daughter to the care of the nuns in the ancient royal Abbey of Poissy. This monastery was supposed to be a seat of learning more liberal and advanced than was usual for feminine education in those days. Ancient and modern literature was there cultivated, and its pupils were often good Latin scholars, as well as proficients in the arts of music and painting. M. de Marillac would seem to have thought the education too fine for his daughter, or perhaps, rather, the tone of the monastery too worldly, so at the end of a couple of years he removed her, and placed her with a lady capable of carrying on her studies in a more serious spirit, without, however, changing their programme; for Louise continued to cultivate music, and more especially painting, for which she had no mean talent. Her father himself instructed her in philosophy and the abstract sciences, in which she took great pleasure.

These masculine studies strengthened her mind against the frivolous pursuits so attractive to young girls of her position, and, instead of draw ing away her thoughts from spiritual interests, seem rather to have nourished her piety and turned her aspirations towards the religious life. The seventeenth century was an age of strong contrasts. Side by side with savage lawlessness there arose examples of virtue and heroic faith grand and beautiful enough to redeem all the surrounding ugliness and corruption. The daughters of Saint Teresa, after kindling the fires of their seraphic fervour all over Spain, had carried their lighted torch across the Pyrenees, and set its flame burning in the midst of dissolute Paris. Michel de Marillac, the Keeper of the Seals, had been chiefly instrumental in bringing the Carmelites into France,

where they had soon become objects of veneration and sympathy. It would, therefore, have seemed natural enough if Louise had felt attracted towards Carmel; but she did not: her preference was for the Capuchin Sisters, or the Daughters of the Passion as they were called. The Rule of the Capuchins was nearly as severe as that of the Carmelites, and Louise was satisfied that her vocation was for their order. She prayed and pondered over it, and when her mind was quite made up she spoke to her confessor, Pere Honore. He unhesitatingly desired her to put the idea from her, assured her that she had no vocation for the cloister, and that God had quite other designs on her. Pere Honore was a man held in high esteem for sanctity, favoured with the gift of miracles and prophecy; Louise, with the simplicity and obedience of a child, bowed to his authority as to the voice of God Himself. She continued her quiet life of study and piety, devoting herself to her father for a few years more. She was not much over twenty when M. de Marillac died. With his last breath he declared she had been the great blessing of his life; “given to me,” he said, “for the repose and consolation of my mind under its many sorrows.”

Louise was now quite alone. Her family, according to the custom of their nation, sought at once a suitable marriage for her, and, in dutiful compliance with their wishes, she accepted the protector of their choice, and allowed herself to be united to M. Antoine Legras, a gentleman some few years older than herself. Antoine Legras was not noble, but he was of a good family good enough to qualify him for the high and responsible position of Secretary to the Queen, Marie de Medicis. M. Legras was rich in worldly goods, and still more so in virtue, being the worthy representative of a family noted in Auvergne (their native country, and that of the De Marillacs) for their extraordinary love of the poor a virtue comparatively unknown in those days, and which his young

wife was destined to display with an almost unprecedented generosity.

Mademoiselle Legras, as she was henceforth named her husband's birth not entitling her to take the title of Madame, which was reserved to the wives of noblemen bid fair to be a very happy wife. Her husband was devoted to her, and worthy of her; she was surrounded by kind and pleasant friends; her health was good, her position excellent, and in due course a child came to cement the union, which henceforth included every element of domestic happiness. This full cup of earthly bliss did not intoxicate the young wife, or lessen the place that God and His suffering poor had hitherto filled in her heart. Even in the first days of her happy motherhood her thoughts were divided between her child and the poor, to whom she was one day to become such a universal mother. Visiting the poor was not in those days, as it is now, one of the obvious duties of a Catholic lady's life. The manners of the times, and still more the horrible conditions of existence of the poor, put barriers between the classes which it required extraordinary courage, both moral and physical, to break through. The glance we have taken at the haunts of the beggars gives a faint idea of the difficulty there must have been in penetrating there even on an errand of kindness, and the abodes of the honest poor were not much more accessible. Mlle. Legras determined to brave all obstacles, to run all the risks, and defy human respect, in order to bring some relief to these unfortunate fellow-creatures. Every day she went forth alone and penetrated into the slums where they lived, sought out those who were sick, and ministered to them. In those days, when the poor fell ill they lay there uncared for till they got well, or died like animals that were of no account to any one. Louise discovered these forsaken outcasts, brought them medicines, dressed their ulcers, shook up the filthy straw that was their only bed, helped

them to die when the end came, and then washed their poor bodies, that were often beginning to putrefy before death delivered them from the pangs of disease. Antoine Legras must have been a very brave man to let his young wife set such an extra ordinary precedent to the society of her day, and we can readily understand the amazement, the mild scandal, that it must have caused to her fastidious friends. The total and systematic neglect of the poor, in an age when faith was so much livelier and more heroic than in our own, is hard to understand; but charity, though it shone forth with miraculous power in individuals, was not organised as it is now, and our modern appliances for making material life so much less cruel to the destitute were unknown in a century whose civilization looks to us like barbarism. Louise's devotion and activity in the service of the poor grew in proportion with her experience of their need and sufferings. Nothing hindered her attendance on them. She visited them in all weathers; when the snow was deep on the ground, and the wind and rain driving against her, she was to be seen plodding daily through the dark lanes and courts so unfrequented by any decent-looking person as to be considered unsafe. There was a hill at that time at the back of her house (in the parish of Saint Sauveur) that she used to climb up every day to nurse an old woman who lived at the top of it. She would break away from the society of her husband, and escape from pleasant gatherings of her friends, to go to this poor soul at the hour she was expected, carrying a heavy basket with food which she would herself prepare for the invalid, after washing and combing her and cleaning out her room.

Not long after Mlle. Legras marriage, Saint Francis de Sales was passing through Paris, and attracted by her reputation for charity, he went to visit her. She was ill at the time, so the visit of the holy Bishop was no doubt doubly welcome to Louise, who all her life spoke with fervent gratitude of his

kindness to her, and the help he had been to her spiritual life. Saint Francis gave her for director the venerable Bishop of Belley, Monseigneur Camus, whom he had ordained and consecrated, and of whom he used to speak as “my son, my apprentice, and my one chef-d-ouvre.” Monseigneur Camus was a man of great sanctity, and his love for the poor made at once a strong bond between him and his new penitent. He stimulated her ardour in their service, while his wisdom and firmness kept it within the bounds of prudence and discretion. His direction was very simple; the only books he prescribed for her daily use were the *Imitation of Christ* and the *Spiritual Combat* that little book that sufficed to Saint Francis de Sales as his spiritual reading for twenty years. In the matter of bodily mortification, Monsignor Camus was generous, allowing her, in addition to the use of the hair-shirt that she had been in the habit of wearing under her silk gowns, the frequent use of a discipline, which had been presented to her by Saint Francis as a means “of waking up her devotion.”

This fervour in the service of the poor and the pursuit of personal holiness did not interfere with Mlle. Legras home-life and her duties as a mother and the mistress of a house. She seems to have seldom made her appearance at court, although her husband's position near the Queen compelled his constant presence there; but she was far from leading the life of a recluse, and seems to have taken her place in society graciously and ungrudgingly. Louise had been about seven years married when her husband s health began to give her serious anxiety. Her love for him had grown to be part of her life, and the mere thought of losing him filled her soul with terror. It may have been a presentiment that this sacrifice was in store for her, as well as a generous impulse to give herself more un reservedly to God, that moved her one morning (on the Feast of Saint Monica), after Holy Communion, to make a vow that if her husband died she

would consecrate herself absolutely and irrevocably to the service of the poor in the state of widowhood, as described by Saint Paul. This vow she renewed every year on the same feast until the hour came for its fulfillment.

Meantime Louise was not spared those interior trials which are the lot of souls aspiring to perfection. She suffered from scruples till they reached the point sometimes of destroying her peace of mind and darkening her understanding. Her impulse in these crises was to pacify her conscience by making a general confession, a remedy which her confessor was firm in refusing, urging her to turn away from the thought of her sins and the punishment they deserved, and to think more of the goodness and love of Our Lord.

“There you are again with your general confession!” writes Monseigneur Camus in answer to her prayer to be let make one for the Jubilee. “Ah no; the Jubilee has not come for that, but to make us rejoice in our Saviour and our God, and cry out to Him from our hearts, Jubilemus Deo salutaris nostro!” He rebukes her again for thinking so much of herself and her sins, a habit which had the effect of disquieting her naturally sensitive conscience. “Turn your eyes away from yourself and fix them upon Jesus Christ,” repeats the confessor; “in this consists your perfection, and in this I will say with the Apostle that I speak to you according to the spirit of God.”

During this trial, which lasted several years, there were intervals of deep peace, when Louise felt like one resting after the battle, and drawing breath for fresh combats. But the trial, severe as it was, was only the prelude to one far more painful that she had yet to undergo. She was suddenly assailed by a very tempest of temptation concerning the validity of her present vocation and state of life. Had she not been deaf to the voice of God, and gone deliberately against

His will in renouncing her first vocation to the religious life? And if so, was she not living in sin, and was not her marriage a sacrilege in the eyes of God? What remained to her, in that case, but to leave her husband and her child, and go and embrace the religious life to which she had been called, and which she had renounced from cowardice in the first instance? When Louise found her soul suddenly submerged in this torrent of temptation, her first movement was to fly to Monseigneur Camus for counsel and support; but here the enemy met her with a fresh attack. Was not Mgr. Camus too indulgent? was he not likely to take a more merciful view of her miserable case than was consistent with the stern rights of God's inexorable justice? Might he not be influenced by the kindness of his heart, by pity for her, and by regard for the happiness of her husband and her child? Ought she not rather to carry her soul to some strange priest, who would judge her with a severity unmitigated by any of these considerations? This doubt, at first a mere whisper, rose rapidly in strength and terror, until the darkness closed round her, and she saw no ray of light, no door of escape in any direction. Her life became a torment, her very sleep was disturbed by visions in which she beheld her soul lost, and God angry and threatening. Little by little, the darkness, which had so far only clouded the external conditions of her spiritual life, as it were, invaded her inmost soul, and she began to feel the foundations of her faith giving way; the immortality of the soul, the divinity of Christ, at last the very existence of God all seemed to be vanishing in a night of blackness and despair. For ten days this anguish lasted without one moment's rest. Louise spoke to no one, but clung blindly to God by prayer, crying out to Him incessantly like one shipwrecked on raging waters. At the end of the tenth day God took pity on her. It was on Pentecost morning. She relates the incident herself in a letter that is preserved in the archives of the Sisters of Charity: “During Mass, in the Church of San Nicholas-des-

Champs, my mind was instantaneously cleared of all its doubts. I was made to see that I might remain with my husband; that a day would come when I should be in a state to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that I should be with persons who would do the same thing. I under stood that it was to be in a place where I was to help my neighbour; but I could not make out how this was to be, because I saw that there was coming and going. I was also assured that I might be at rest concerning my director, that God would give me one whom He showed me then; I seemed to see him, but to feel some repugnance towards accepting him; I consented, however, and it seemed to me that the change was not to take place yet awhile. My last trial was removed by the assurance I felt within me that God was telling me these things, and that consequently, since God was, I should not doubt of the rest."

This terrible interior trial was followed by a period of great peace and renewed fervour, and was no doubt sent to prepare Louise for the sorrow that was approaching. M. Legras, whose health had been declining for some time, though he was still a young man, fell suddenly ill. His wife nursed him herself with untiring devotion and a tenderness which made him realize as never before that the strongest human love, so far from being chilled or lessened by being shared with God, is, on the contrary, strengthened and intensified. Louise tended him "like a mother," he said himself, and he died supported by her faith and consoled by her tenderness and piety. She was quite alone with him when he breathed his last; it was in the dead of the night, and there was no one near her; she closed his eyes, and gave way unrestrainedly to her grief, and passed the remainder of the night weeping and praying by his dead body. During this solemn watch she renewed once again her vow of con secration to God in the holy state of widowhood. The time had indeed now come for her to put it in practice,

and to look for the fulfillment of that interior prophecy concerning her future vocation which had soothed her soul under the temptation we have related. The new director who had been promised to her, and whom she saw herself “accepting with a certain repugnance,” was no other than the “good M. Vincent.” The repugnance had been at the first moment mutual. When Monseigneur Camus, compelled to absent himself from Paris, requested M. Vincent to take Mlle. Legras as his penitent, he refused. The pitiful-hearted priest, whose charity to the poor was destined to shine like a new sun in the firmament of the saints, had the greatest reluctance to take a moment of his time from their service to give it to the rich. It required a certain amount of persuasion, therefore, to induce him to accept Louise as his spiritual daughter; and he only yielded at last to the assurance that had Saint Francis de Sales, whom he had deeply loved and venerated, been still alive, he would have added his entreaties to those of Monseigneur Camus. Mlle. Legras soon felt that Vincent was truly the servant of God promised to her in her vision was it? and in order more fully to profit by his direction she resolved to change her residence from the then fashionable Marais to the Rue Saint Victor, which was in Vincent's parish.

Her life now entered on an altered course. She determined to renounce the few external signs and habits which had hitherto bound her to the world, and to become in spirit and in deed the perfect widow described by the Apostle. Her duty to her child took the first place in her heart and conscience, and she devoted herself un sparingly to its fulfillment; but this still left a large margin of time and energy to be disposed of, and Louise filled it up with prayer and the service of the poor. She still cherished the desire of embracing the religious life, but her child offered an insurmountable barrier to its realization for the present, and must do so for many years to come; and, moreover, she had

been told by that mysterious voice, which on Pentecost morning had set her soul at rest, that the religious vocation in store for her was one “where there was coming and going,” a circumstance absolutely incompatible with the conventual life as it was then understood, and excluding, in fact, the idea of the cloister altogether. She became the intimate friend of the saintly Prioress of Carmel, Mere Madeleine de Saint Joseph, and of that other holy religious, Mere Catherine de Beaumont, Superior of the Visitation; but while assisting her with their pious counsels, neither of these friends endeavoured to draw her into her community; they discerned, as did Saint Vincent de Paul, that God was leading her soul to some high vocation, known as yet but to Himself.

Louise found another help and most valuable spiritual guide in her uncle, Michel de Marillac, who, though bearing the cares of State, and living amid the splendours of a dissolute court, kept his heart unspotted from the world, and his piety as pure and fervent as the piety of a child. This piety was a birthright amongst the De Marillacs. While the Keeper of the Seals was edifying the world by his holiness amidst its most perilous allurements, two of his sisters-in-law, young widows, and three of his nieces, were practising heroic virtue under the habit of Saint Teresa. M. de Marillac's letters to Louise are full of the most mature spiritual wisdom, and read rather like the letters of an austere religious than of a busy statesman.

Saint Vincent soon discovered that he had no ordinary soul to direct in the young widow who rejoiced his heart by her practical unworldliness and her generous love of the poor. He felt with the instinct of a soul taught of God that she was destined to do something more than work at her own perfection, and that while arriving at great personal holiness she was meant to do some great work for others. He could

not as yet discern what that work was to be, but he followed God s lead simply, and directed her without knowing it to the vocation which was to be the dawn of a new era in the history of the Church.

Mlle. Legras had sacrificed a good deal in leaving her spacious and handsomely appointed house in the Marais for the small and uncomfort able one that she now occupied. She had given up the near neighbourhood of her own and her husband's family, and the pleasant companion ship of old friends, who all resided in the Marais. In coming to the Rue Saint Victor she had, there fore, condemned herself to a sort of exile; for in those days of bad roads and difficult means of communication, those who lived in the suburbs were practically as far off from those who inhabited the fashionable quarter as if they had removed from the city altogether. The Rue Saint Victor had, however, many compensations for Louise. Besides enjoying the vicinity of Saint Vincent, she was surrounded by a great number of religious communities, and amongst them the Seminary of Saint Nicholas, which he held in high esteem, and where, by his advice, Louise sent her little Michel as a day-scholar. The partial separation evidently cost the mother many struggles before the stronger element of her love triumphed over the weaker; for we see “le bon M. Vincent” lecturing her in his gentle way on her too great indulgence and “sensiblerie” for the child, who seems at a very early date to have become rather too much for his fond mother to manage without assistance. Few traits in the intercourse of the Saint with his penitent are more touchingly beautiful than his interest in Michel, and the way he shared her anxiety and affection for him.

The absence of this claim upon her time during the day, left Louise now free to content more abundantly the pious desires of her soul. She drew up a kind of deed of

consecration, which is still preserved amongst the treasures of the Sisters of Charity, and made doubly precious by the corrections written in the hand of Saint Vincent. After a fervent act of contrition, Louise goes on to renew her baptismal engagements, and her vow to devote herself wholly and irrevocably in the service of God, “and to the practice of humility, obedience, poverty, suffering, and charity, in order to honour these virtues in Jesus Christ,” protesting her resolve ” never again to offend God with any part of my being, and to abandon myself entirely to the designs of His Providence for the accomplishment of His holy will in me, to which I sacrifice and dedicate myself for ever, choosing it for my supreme consolation.” Not satisfied with writing out this long, detailed Act of Consecration, Louise made an abridgment of it, which she placed so that it continually met her eye and reminded her of the solemn engagement she had contracted. Saint Vincent was delighted with both, and cordially congratulated her on the fervent dis positions with which God favoured her. “I will keep in my heart,” he writes to her, “the generous resolution you have made of honouring the adorable Hidden Life of Our Lord, as He has given you the desire to do from your youth up. … Oh! how far removed are such thoughts from flesh and blood! But this is what is needed by a dear child of God.”

He gave practical shape to these generous resolutions by drawing up for his penitent a rule of life, which constituted in reality a sort of novitiate, in which he trained her to the religious vocation that she was destined one day to inaugurate and render so divinely fruitful to her own and later times. This rule of life fixed her hour of rising at half-past five, then came an hour's meditation on the Gospel or Epistle of the day, to be followed by Prime and Terce “keeping steadily in her mind the affections of the meditation.” After laying this spiritual foundation for the day, she was to turn her attention to household cares, “and

while dress ing attend to such, orders as are necessary to be given.” Mass then follows at half-past eight in summer, and nine in winter. After Mass, work until dinner at eleven, when there comes a quarter of an hour's meditation, after which, adds the rule, “you will return gaily to work either for the Church, the poor, or the menage, continuing thus employed until four o clock, unless interrupted by some indispensable visit to be received or paid.” If neither charity nor propriety make any such demand upon her, she is to go to church and recite the Vespers of the Blessed Virgin, and collect her thoughts in half an hour's meditation; and at five o'clock make her examination of conscience and say the Rosary. After this she will return home, and divide the evening until bedtime between work and spiritual reading. Throughout the day, thus largely filled with spiritual and devout exercises, she is to practise constant ejaculatory prayer, ” making four times in every hour an act of union with the Passion of Our Blessed Saviour,” and taking Our Lady for her mother and model, and mistress in all things.

Such a rule of life left little room for self or the world; but Saint Vincent, not satisfied with the barriers of assiduous prayer and work, further supplements these by prescribing habitual mortification and penance: Louise is to take the discipline three times a week (the discipline given to her by Saint Francis de Sales to “help her to stir up her devotion”); and to wear the iron girdle on Communion days all the morning, and the whole day on Friday; she is to fast not only in Lent and Advent, but every Friday and on all the vigils of Feasts of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, and the Apostles, and to restrain herself to two meals all the year round.

It may excite surprise not to see in this rigorously supernatural rule of life any provision made for the service of the poor, the work so specially dear to both the confessor and the penitent. But this omission is a further proof of the

Saint's wisdom and respect for the primary natural duties imposed by God. There can be no doubt but that visits to the sick poor near her own dwelling, and work for them at home, found a large place in Louise's daily life; but she was a mother, and, although her boy was absent for many hours of the day, and in safe keeping, Saint Vincent would not encroach upon his pre-eminent place in the mother's life by committing her to obligations which might at any moment interfere with Michel's interests, or have to be broken through at his call. Even his “dear poor” should not come between the devout Christian woman and that primordial sacred duty which was of God's own ordinance. The guide who was leading her to perfection was careful above all “not to go faster than Providence,” as he used to say himself, and, while training her soul to heroic detachment in other ways, he helps her with his wisdom in training the wayward little fellow, who gave her constant anxiety. She loved him with all her heart, and it does not detract from our sympathy and reverence if we harbour a suspicion that she spoiled him a little, and was altogether a trifle weak with him; and if, moreover, the “good M. Vincent” strikes us as having been very paternally condescending to this weakness in the widowed mother, it only makes us love him the more, and helps us to realise what the sublime austerity of their lives sometimes tempts us to forget, that the saints are, after all, of the same flesh and blood as ourselves.

While patiently carrying out the self-denying rule prescribed for her, Louise continued to sigh for a life of more direct and active service: she longed to go and devote her energies wholly to the suffering poor, to give up everything to serve them. She complained to Saint Vincent of the good-for-nothing life she was leading, “where the days drag on as if they were months.” He urges her to be patient, to wait for the holy will of God. “Honour specially,” he tells her, “the mystery of Nazareth, the condition of Our Lord unknown as

the Son of God. This must be your centre; this is what He demands of you for the present. If the Divine Majesty does not make known to you, in a way that you cannot mistake, His will that you should do something more than you are doing, don't think about it, and don't let your mind dwell upon it." Again and again he repeats the same counsels: "Pray, pray; prayer is the source of good counsel: communicate often; the Eucharist is the oracle of the inspirations of charity."

She had been about four years under his direction before he began to associate her with his own works of charity. Though we have no distinct assurance of the fact, it seems evident that Michel was by this time placed altogether with the Fathers of the Seminary, and it transpires in the correspondence of his mother with Saint Vincent that he was giving signs of a vocation to the priesthood. So great was Louise's joy at this prospect that Saint Vincent was obliged to moderate it, reminding her that it might be but a passing phase of fervour, and that if so she should not repine, but give God thanks for the grace of piety which would enable the boy to be a good Christian in the world, and eventually secure his salvation.

Saint Vincent had associated her with many charitable works that she was able to help in without leaving her own house. This house had thus gradually become a kind of centre of charity: alms were there received and distributed under his direction; poor girls from the provinces were sent there for help and protection, children to be instructed in the catechism, and others to be prepared for their First Communion. But this usefulness, which involved comparatively small self-sacrifice, was not yet enough to satisfy the generous longings of Louise. She continues her importunities with Saint Vincent who finally begins to yield. While absent on one of his missions, in the year 1629, he

writes to her, “Why not, Mademoiselle, since God gives you still this holy desire? Go to Communion to-morrow, and prepare for the salutary review of the past you propose to make. I cannot express to you how my soul longs to see yours, and learn how it has fared with it. But I am satisfied to mortify my heart in this for the love of God, with which I alone desire to see you occupied. … I pray Him in His infinite love to make you always a true tree of life, producing good fruits of charity.”

Saint Vincent evidently thought the fruit was now ripe, and that the time had come for gathering it. Some twelve years before he had founded a sort of confraternity of charity peculiarly characteristic of the age in its origin and results. This is how it began. He went, one hot summer's day, to preach in the parish church of Chatillon; as he was coming from the sacristy to the pulpit he was waylaid by a charitable lady (named Mme. de Chassaigne.. as Abelly, the Saint's first historian, tells us), who entreated him to make an appeal to the congregation in behalf of a poor family, lying sick and destitute at a miserable farm about half an hour's walk from the town. Saint Vincent was touched with compassion and he spoke with such an eloquence of charity that all who heard him were moved to pity, and immediately after Vespers a great concourse of people trooped off to the farmhouse, carrying with them provisions of all sorts. Saint Vincent, following soon after on the same errand, met them coming back, many sitting down under the trees to rest, for the heat was sultry. It occurred to him, as he looked around and beheld this prompt response to the call of charity, that a great work might be done with all this generous goodwill, if it could but be judiciously employed; whereas, unwisely lavished, it was calculated, as in the present instance, to do more harm than good: these poor people would have much more than they wanted for a few days, after which they would fall back into their former misery. This thought

pursued him for the rest of the day, and on the following morning he called some of the devout ladies of the parish together (amongst them Mme. de Chassaigne), and invited them to form an association for visiting the sick poor in outlying districts beyond the reach of notice or help from the parish. The ladies were some married, some single, but all were to obtain the consent of their husbands or families before committing themselves to the work. They obtained the needful authorisation without difficulty, and Saint Vincent drew up a few rules for their guidance. They were to be called Dames de Charite; they were to look upon the sick poor as children confided to them by Our Lord, and they were to attend upon them regularly every day; going themselves to the butcher's for the meat, and the baker's for the bread, to procure all things necessary for their meals; and they were to prepare these meals at their own houses, and take them twice a day to the poor dinner at nine, and supper at five themselves administering the food to the patients if necessary, and saying a prayer every night for their temporal and spiritual comfort. It was all as simple and spontaneous as possible. Saint Vincent named from amongst the devoted ladies a president and manager, who were to be called officieres, and whose duty it would be to superintend the working of the association, and to recruit new members to it. Having dropped his tiny seed on the good soil, he went home; and the seed sprang up and bore fruit so rapidly that before many months in every parish around Paris there was a “Charity,” as the little congregations were separately styled. He said himself, “It has spread like an epidemic.” At the end of twelve years there were few towns or villages in France without a Charity, and it became necessary to organize some more special arid definite form of supervision over them than it was possible for him to exercise personalty. It was essential that some person, on whose zeal, gentleness, and wisdom he could implicitly rely, should be empowered to visit the numerous and widely scattered

associations, control their working, take cognizance of the lives and characters of the members, and report accurately to him the conditions and results of the work.

Saint Vincent had long decided in his own mind that Mlle. Legras was the person who united the qualities of heart and head requisite for the responsible and arduous office of superintendent. When he proposed that she should go on a journey of inspection, she. accepted the offer with joy, and set forth on her mission in the spirit of one who had received a command direct from Our Lord. Indeed, she felt that the command was an answer to her prayers, and that God had at last condescended to engage her service wholly in the interests of the poor. Louise had experienced enough already to know what that service meant. She had none of the illusions of untried enthusiasm, eager for sacrifice without realizing what it is going to cost. She knew that this visitation of the Charities would involve remaining at a distance for months from her child (whose vocation had melted like a fair morning mist, and who was giving a good deal of trouble to the Fathers who had charge of him), and that, in the next place, it would expose her to great personal fatigue of every description. But the prospect of suffering in the service of the poor only stimulated her ardour the more. Saint Vincent gave her a solemn and pathetic benediction before she departed. “Go,” he said, “in the name of Our Lord! May His divine goodness accompany you; may it be your consolation on the road, your shade in the heat of the sun, your shelter in the cold and the rain, your soft couch in weariness, your strength in toil, and may it finally bring you back to us in perfect health, and full of good works!”

He gave her Holy Communion with his own hand, having previously told her to receive It in honour of the charity of Christ, and “the journeys He took in the interest of charity, the contradictions, the fatigues, and the labours He

underwent for it, and to obtain His blessing and the grace to do all things in His spirit, and to bear all sufferings as He bore His.”

Thus fortified, Louise set out, accompanied by some devout women, who were themselves members of the association. All the expenses of the road were defrayed by her, whose re sources seemed at times miraculously multiplied. She would gladly have lightened the fatigue of the journey to her companions, but in the interest of their common mission she was obliged to let them share the hardships she chose to undergo herself. In order the more easily to gain access to the lives of the poor and to win their confidence, Louise adopted, as far as possible, their habits and manner of living. She travelled in the humblest and most inconvenient way, sometimes riding on a mule, sometimes in a coach, sometimes jolting over the broken roads in a farmer's cart, shaken till her bones ached, often walking long distances, and halting dead beat at the end of her journey at some miserable farmhouse or wayside inn, where there was neither comfort nor cleanliness.

Her plan was, on arriving at a village, to go first to the church, and then to the cure, and ask his blessing and approval on the work she had come to do. She then convened a meeting of the members of the Charity, made acquaintance with them, inquired into the state of the work, the needs and condition of the poor, etc. When these business details had been gone through, she would address the members in words of such burning zeal that those who had heard Saint Vincent used to say that he had passed on his gift of unction to Mlle. Legras. Her fervent words had a power in them that at once unlocked the hearts of those who listened, and enlisted their utmost sympathies in the work she was engaged upon. After this little meeting Louise would ask for the names and dwellings of the poor who were

looked after by the Charity, and would set out herself to visit them all, dressing the wounds of those that were in need of it, consoling and cheering all. Then she went to the hospital and the school, which in many places had grown out of this humble work of visitation of the sick, and never left the village until she had made herself thoroughly acquainted with its wants, and the manner in which they were dealt with by the Charity. She increased the number of members in many places, and founded Charities in others where they had not previously existed. She held catechism classes that were especially fruitful, gathering crowds of old and young to hear her lucid and glowing explanations of Christian doctrine.

This first visitation was successful beyond Saint Vincent's expectations; and when Louise returned to Paris it was with the blessed consciousness that her labours had been of use, and that her service was henceforth accepted unreservedly, and that she had proved physically equal to it. Her next tournee, in the following spring, was to the Charities in the immediate neighbourhood of Paris. The journey, for being less remote, did not involve less fatigue, and Louise, emboldened by the result of her first campaign, was even more unsparing to herself this time. She travelled without the smallest regard to her own comfort, slept where she could, at any wretched hovel on the roadside; ate anything that came to hand; led, in fact, the life of the poorest among the poor that she went to serve. So marvellous was the energy of soul and body that she displayed during this visitation, that Saint Vincent hearing of it, exclaims in a letter, “I praise God who has given you the health of sixty people in labouring for the salvation of others!”

But even the health of sixty people could not long hold out against the unmerciful manner in which Louise abused it. She broke down on the road, and was so seriously ill as to

cause alarm to her friends. She reassures Saint Vincent, however, and he answers characteristically, “Is not your heart comforted at having been found worthy to surfer in serving God? You certainly owe Him special thanks for this.” But when the illness is past, and she is about to resume her work, he adds, with his wonted wisdom. “Now, have a care to preserve your health for the sake of Our Lord and His poor suffering members. Take care not to overdo it. It is a trick of the devil's to entrap good souls by inciting them to do too much, so that they may not be able to do anything. The Spirit of God, on the contrary, gently incites them to do the good they are equal to, in order that they may persevere in it a long time.”

The visitation to Beauvais was memorable amongst many. Abelly, the first historian of Saint Vincent, relates that the Bishop was so delighted with the spirit and results of the Confraternity that he expressed a wish to have a branch of it in every parish of his diocese Louise was consequently received in every town and village of the diocese with extraordinary marks of respect and love. At the classes of religious instruction that she held for women, crowds went to hear her, like those that gather round some preacher, an A wonders were told of the effect of her fervent, unstudied eloquence. When she was leaving the town of Beauvais, a great crowd accompanied her some way on the road; at a certain point the coach stood, in order that she might bid them farewell; when it moved on, the wheel went over the body of a child: a cry of horror called Louise's attention to the accident, and told her that the child was supposed to be killed. She sent up a hurried prayer, and, to the amazement of all the spectators, the child stood up, perfectly unharmed. The noise of this incident spread far and wide, and, coming upon the repute of holiness and charity that Louise already enjoyed, gained for her the character of a saint. Saint Vincent, hearing of these things, grew alarmed. With the

instinct of a love pure from all human alloy, he took fright for the humility of his child, and writes to her in anxiety, ” Unite yourself in spirit to the mockeries, insults, and bad treatment that the Son of God suffered. When you are esteemed and honoured, Mademoiselle, let your mind be as lowly and humiliated in these honours as in contempt; be like to the bee that makes honey as well out of the dew that falls upon absinthe as out of that which falls upon the rose.” But her humility was proof against all trials, and she returned from this journey, which had been a sort of triumphant progress, as simple and lowly, as much the servant of the poor, as ever.

Amongst the companions who shared and lightened the labours of Louise at this period, there are a few who deserve a separate mention as being especially dear to both her and Saint Vincent. Mademoiselle Pollalion was, like herself, a widow young, wealthy, beautiful, endowed with remarkable gifts, and with a certain natural courage which was peculiarly valuable to Mlle. Legras, whose childlike timidity often stood in her way. Mlle. Pollalion had made a brilliant figure at court during the short time that she frequented that worldly centre, and had left behind her there such a reputation for sanctity as to be accredited with working miracles.

Another of Louise's helpmates was a young shepherdess named Marguerite Naseau. The dream of this ardent young soul while tending her father's flocks had been to learn to read and write, so that she might teach other poor girls to do so, and thus help them to become holy by enabling them to read good books. The simplicity of her character, and probably also the lowliness of her origin, endeared Marguerite specially to Saint Vincent, who treated the little shepherdess with a sort of fond, fatherly predilection. Her zeal in the service of the suffering poor made another sweet

and potent bond between them. Opportunities soon presented themselves to Marguerite for carrying this service to the point of heroism.

The plague, which had become in a manner indigenous to the soil of France, broke out with sudden violence in the year 1631, soon after Louise's return from the memorable visitation of Beauvais. The worst phase of modern epidemic can give us but a faint idea of what this fearful scourge was in those days. When we read of it in the chronicles of the times, it seems incredible that any were ever left in the stricken country to tell the tale of the horrors they had witnessed. The ravages of the plague, and its consequences, were so appalling as hardly to be realizable in these days of improved sanitary conditions. Two hundred and fifty years ago sanitary precautions of the most elementary kind were absolutely unknown; no steps were taken to preserve the public health, and when the pestilence broke out it flourished unchecked. The moment the dreaded cry arose, “The plague is here!” the population were seized with panic; the tenderest human ties and duties were forgotten, every sacred bond and affection was swallowed up in the one animal instinct of self-preservation; husbands and wives fled from each other; mothers threw their babes into the street; the dead were left unburied in deserted houses, poisoning the air, and amassing corruption and disease in the lane-ways and courts, where the dead-cart never passed with its ghastly freight and its cry, “Bring out your dead!”

Everything was paralysed the moment the plague arrived. All social life came to a stand still. Commerce was suspended in the towns, agriculture in the country. The harvest was left to rot in the fields; wolves came down and devoured the putrefying corpses, and in the. wake of pestilence there came famine, and a new train of miseries fell upon the despairing and exasperated population.

The spectacle of Sisters of Charity braving death in hospitals and on battle-fields is a common one now-a-days, but in the time of Saint Vincent this triumph of Christian love had not yet been manifested to the world; and when Louise and her companions inaugurated it in the service of the plague-stricken, the admiration they excited was in proportion to the novelty of the example. Charity knows no fear; but in order to appreciate the superhuman degree of charity displayed by Louise and her sisters, we should be able to realize the madness of terror that possessed the bravest in presence of the plague. On returning from Beauvais, she found the city panic-stricken. Her first step was to found a new Charity in the parish of Saint Nicholas, in order to secure more abundant help in the service of the victims; her next effort was to encourage them by her example to defy alike fear and contagion. A poor girl, whom they were in the habit of visiting, was stricken with the plague; Louise went herself to nurse her, spent hours by her bedside, and after breathing the deadly air, and touching the diseased body, came out of the ordeal unharmed. This courageous example emboldened her companions, and enchanted Saint Vincent. “I confess, Mademoiselle,” he wrote to her, “that my heart was so moved when I heard of this, that had it not been in the middle of the night, I must there and then have gone to see you. The goodness of God towards those who give themselves to Him in the Confraternity of Charity, none of whom have so far been attacked by the plague, gives me perfect confidence that He will preserve you from it. Will you believe it, Mademoiselle? I not only visited M. le Sous-Prieur of Saint Lazare, who died of the plague, but I even inhaled his dying breath; and yet neither I nor any of our people who assisted him to the last took any harm. No: be not afraid; Our Lord means to make use of you for something that concerns His glory, and I am persuaded He will preserve you for this.”

God made good this last promise. Louise was borne unharmed through the time of the plague; but some of her sisters earned the crown of martyrdom in their attendance on the sick. Amongst these generous victims of charity was Marguerite Naseau. She gave herself up to her service from the first with an angelic fervour and sweetness that might have warned those who witnessed them that the reward was at hand, and the course of the brave little shepherdess nearly run. From morning till night Marguerite was to be seen going from one sick-house to another, diligent, deft, devoted, nursing and comforting the sick, and helping the dying, and doing it all as simply and naturally as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to spend herself in the service of charity. One day she was coming home that is, to the hired room that she called her home when, not far from her own door, a woman fell down, stricken with the plague. Marguerite carried her to her own room and put her into her bed, watched by her and at last, worn out with fatigue, she lay down beside her. The woman died, and Marguerite, having stood by her to the last, felt that her own turn had come. She tidied her little room, and went to the hospital, where she had long been in daily attendance, and asked for a bed to die in. They gave her one, and she did die a few days later of the plague; but it was all done, like the rest, quite simply, as if death were an act of charity or piety to be performed like any other, without excitement or alarm.

The moment Saint Vincent heard that Marguerite was stricken he sent Louise on a visitation out of Paris, so that she might be spared the pain of seeing her dear little sister a prey to the pangs of that most awful of deaths. When all was over, he wrote himself to break the tidings to her and offer the consolations of his sympathy. “May God strengthen you!” he says; “may we be able to say of you, *Mulieremfortem quis inveniet!* You understand that much Latin: I need not translate it.”

This sorrow, which came to Louise in the midst of the visitation for which Saint Vincent had hurried her out of Paris, served only to give a fresh stimulant to her ardour in the service of God, and it seemed to her that Marguerite continued even more efficaciously from heaven the help she had been to her on earth, so many and visible were the graces granted to her and her companions during this journey. She founded a number of new Charities, made collections in the town, and gathered such an amount of money that she was enabled to purchase land and cattle for hospitals that she had previously set going, to buy beds for the sick, and a large stock of linen for their use; in fact, to change the condition of the poor wherever she passed.

These arduous and successful efforts involved, however, an expenditure of strength that ended at last in a sudden break-down. Louise fell ill. Happily, in those da}/s of slow posts the bad news did not reach Saint Vincent until it was accompanied by the good news that she was recovering. “Blessed be God that you are well again!” he writes joyfully; “but if you feel any threat of a relapse, prevent it, I pray you, and come home.”

Louise needed not to be driven home by the goad of bodily suffering. The thought of her son was like a cord always drawing her heart back when she moved to a distance from him, and her persevering courage in absenting herself periodically from Paris, in the service of the poor, gave, better than any other sacrifice she could make, the measure of her love of God.

Michel was now a youth full of spirit and charm, but not over-endowed with wisdom or steadiness of purpose, in spite of the careful training he had had under Saint Vincent and the Fathers of Saint Nicholas. He seems to have won their affection, at any rate, though he failed to realise their

expectations, and nothing is more delightful than to hear Saint Vincent taking the lad's part, and covering his follies and wayward ness, and even his idleness, with the mantle of his saintlike indulgence. While Mlle. Legras is absent on her visitations, the “good M. Vincent,” who had all the poor of France on his shoulders, besides work enough to kill any one but a saint, found time to keep her minutely informed of everything about Michel, relating it all with a naive simplicity that makes us love the dear, human, tender-hearted old Saint, while we bow down in veneration before his heroic sanctity. He chides Louise playfully for her over-anxiety, reminding her that she must be patient with the boy's youth and natural temperament, and trust more to the Providence of God than to her own strivings and counsels. He used to call her “the most motherful of mothers ” and try to reason her out of worrying about faults and follies that grace and experience alone could mend. When the worrying persisted unreasonably, he would strike the Sursum corda, and warn his penitent of what was sinful and unworthy in this over-preoccupation, “which hampers the mind, and deprives the soul of that tranquillity in which Our Lord wishes it to dwell.”

“Don't be uneasy about Michel,” he writes to her; “we are taking good care of him. His mind is opening more and more. He is merry and good with us, and edifies us all. If this continues there is reason to praise God, and to hope that he will be a great comfort to you.” When this edifying interval is succeeded by a phase of wayward folly, Saint Vincent is ready to console the mother by assuring her that it will pass away; that the boy is sound at heart, and, with patience and prayer, is sure to come right by-and-by.

There is something comforting in the human weaknesses of saints and souls high in holiness; it is encouraging to see mothers like Louise de Marillac and Saint Frances de Chantal

“worrying” about their children, anxious about their worldly future, puzzling how to solve for them the great problem that troubles common mortals, “how shall they be clothed, and where shall they live, and whom shall they marry?” Surely this strong human motherfulness helped both these holy women to be the grand, generous servants of God that they were; and we may believe that if they had not loved their children so tenderly, they would not have loved Him so heroically.

The De Marillacs were a family group which at this period presented a venerable combination of the most perfect divine and human love. They were devotedly fond of each other, and they were Christians of the antique type some selling all things and giving to the poor, others leading the lives of anchorites in the world; others, again, devoted to prayer and suffering in the cloister. Perhaps the most remarkable figure in this family of elect souls was Michel, the minister and trusted friend of Marie de Medicis. This trust, and the noble qualities which inspired it, made M. de Marillac's position one of dangerous superiority; it drew upon him the jealous hatred of Richelieu, who was disputing with the Queen for the supremacy of power. According as the young king fell by turns under the dominion of his mother or her minister, courtiers rose and fell in royal favour, and cabinets were made and unmade, statesmen were rewarded or sacrificed. The two brothers De Marillac, Michel and Louis (Marshal of France), were amongst those whom Louis XIII showed the highest regard for. He said of the latter, “It is for life and death between us. I would go to the Indies to get him back.” But the friendship of the boy-king was no safeguard against the malignant power of Richelieu. He bided his time, and when the Marshal was away with the army in Piedmont he worked upon Louis and extracted from him, in a moment of weakness and suspicion, an order for the Marshal's arrest. It was executed secretly, afraid of

exciting a mutiny amongst the troops, by whom M. de Marillac was adored; and the soldier who had won countless victories for his king was at the weak monarch's treacherous bidding thrown into prison, put upon a mock trial before judges in the pay of Richelieu, and on a charge of high treason condemned to death. He was beheaded, and his body taken from the scaffold to the house of his brother, whose wife received it his own wife having died of grief before the day of the execution. Louise was in the midst of her family during this terrible moment, broken-hearted, but sustaining them by her courage and faith, while needing in her turn the support of Saint Vincent's sympathy and help. It was given wisely and lovingly. He reminds her of the good life and admirable death of her uncle, and, while pitying her with all his heart, he bids her rejoice in the crown that has rewarded both. Your uncle has honoured the execution of the Son of God by uniting his own to it," he says, "Ah! what does it matter, after all, how those we love go to God. provided they go!"

But a far heavier blow was in store for Louise than the death even of Marshal de Marillac. Her beloved Uncle Michel, who had been as a father to her, and whom she venerated only second to Saint Vincent, was himself in prison, and daily expecting to share his brother's doom. The indignation roused against Richelieu by his cruel and implacable vengeance in murdering the Marshal, who was universally esteemed by all parties, induced the Cardinal probably to delay the execution of Michel, who lingered on in prison, full of joy in his sufferings, and ready to embrace whatever God sent. His letters to his family during this period of anxiety and misery read like the utterances of a saint.

"I wish," he writes to his wife, "I could send you a good share of the graces God has granted me under this trial. … If you knew what they are, instead of moderating your grief, you

would rather have need to moderate your joy for me.” He continues in every letter to speak of these interior joys that changed his cruel captivity to a time of rest and delight. “One single gleam of the goods of the next life is more than enough,” he exclaims, “not only to make us bear patiently all the afflictions of this one, but to make us utterly forget them!” He occupied his long hours of solitude in making a new translation of the Imitation of Christ, and in writing a Tract on Eternal Life.

Saint Vincent, who enjoyed the favour of the Queen, Anne of Austria, appealed to her on behalf of M. de Marillac; but the Spanish princess, who went to the hospitals and tended the sick with her own hands those beautiful hands that were sung by all the poets of the day remained insensible to the petition of the man whom she honoured as a saint. There was nothing calculated to horrify her conscience or touch her heart in the fact of a powerful minister getting rid of a weaker one who stood in his way; such things were of daily occurrence; her own life already counted many similar transactions, presenting as it did a mixture of fervent faith and charity with ruthless tyranny and the most extravagant self-indulgence.

Louise worked on her side with all those friends who had influence at court; but in vain: she did not even obtain the small grace of being allowed to visit her uncle in his prison. In her helplessness she took refuge in prayer and good works. She spent her days slaving in the hospitals and the houses of the poor, and going to the convents to beg prayers for the beloved prisoner. Every morning saw her hurrying to the Carmelite Convent in the Rue Saint Jacques, where the saintly Mere Madeleine de Saint Joseph had the Blessed Sacrament exposed for sixty days and nights, while the community, which counted two of Michel de Marillac's daughters, made constant prayer on his behalf.

These supplications were answered in renewed joys and deeper peace to the prisoner; but the long confinement, and the hardships to which he was subjected, proved too much for his bodily strength. His health broke down, and failed rapidly. When the doctor told him he was to prepare for death, he exclaimed, “Thank God! You could not give me better news. I am ready to go, and as there is not much time to lose, let us make the most of it.”

His wife and daughter and grandchildren were now admitted to the prison. He received the last rites of the Church with great devotion in their presence, and, having made his thanks giving, he sat on the edge of his little camp-bed and went on working at his Tract on Eternal Life. Presently his sight began to fail, and he saw double; still he went on writing; but after a while he could not discern the words he wrote, so he laid down the pen, and said, “I can see no more; I cannot distinguish your faces.” He embraced his wife and children and blessed them all tenderly, and then, still sitting in the same posture, clasped his hands, and composed himself quietly to die.

Louise was stricken to the earth with grief at his death. The one mercy she and Mere Madeleine were able to wring from Richelieu was the permission to have her uncle's body taken from the prison of Chateaudun to the Carmelite Convent, where it was buried in the Chapel of Saint Joseph, with an epitaph composed by Mere Madeleine. Here the Christian gentle men rested amidst the daughters of Saint Teresa, who owed him so much, and loved him so gratefully.

From this great sorrow Louise rose up more detached from this world. Her heart seemed henceforth to grow larger and more ardent in the pursuit of holiness. She had never relaxed her service of the poor even in the first moment of

her grief, and she continued it now more generously than ever.

Her visitations had hitherto been attended with the greatest success, both as regarded the co-operation of the rich and the goodwill of the poor, and the approval of the Bishops and clergy. A check, however, came in this prosperous course at Chalons. The Bishop, informed by some ill-disposed persons that Mlle. Legras was introducing strange practices into the diocese, became alarmed, and withdrew his countenance from her and the Association. She applied at once to Saint Vincent for guidance, and he desired her to hold herself entirely at the Bishop's orders; to go to him and justify herself, if invited to do so, or, if he expressed a wish that she should leave, to come away at once. Apparently the latter course was the one preferred by the Bishop, for Mlle. Legras suddenly left Chalons, and returned in haste to Paris.

Humility, as well as a certain timid self-mistrust which was natural to her, prompted Louise to lay the blame of this misadventure on herself, and to impute to her own faults and incapacity the ill-will of the inhabitants and the opposition of the Bishop. But here, as ever, Saint Vincent was at hand with his illuminating wisdom and kindness. “Happy you,” he writes to her, “to be thus likened to the Son of God, and driven away from a place where you are doing no harm! . . . I beseech you do not now begin to think that this has happened through your own fault. No: it is not so; it is simply a dispensation of God, for His greater glory and for the good of your soul.” He goes on to remind her of Saint Louis, who accepted unmurmuringly the failure of his great undertaking, the Crusade, and returned with his arms defeated, but his faith unshaken. This lowly opinion of herself was apt at times to become a drag on Louise's courage, and to check her naturally bright spirits; and we see Saint Vincent combating it, and impressing upon her

that the service of God is a service of joy. “Above all, be gay!” he repeats in his letters; “honour the holy cheerfulness of Our Lord and His Mother. Let us be gay, let us be merry, Mademoiselle, seeing what a Lord it is whom we serve!” he exclaims again, like a happy child.

The failure which for a moment discouraged Mlle. Legras was an isolated incident, and never again arrested the progress of the Association. The Charities were going on prosperously in every direction, and had taken a development which called for a more complete organisation in the working of them. It had been found necessary at an earlier stage to enlist the services of women of the humbler classes in the attendance on the sick, the physical strength of women born and nurtured like herself and her companion Dames de Charite being unequal to the manual work that had to be done. Louise had had little difficulty in recruiting as she went on her way through the towns and villages, peasant girls who were piously inclined, and glad to embrace a sort of religious life from which want of means and education must otherwise exclude them. But piety and physical strength are not the only requisites for a good sick-nurse, and the rough-and-ready ways of the country girls, together with their entire ignorance, often made their assistance a dubious gain in the hospitals and sick-rooms. Louise consequently proposed to take a certain number of them into her own house and train them to be efficient nurses, and at the same time complete their religious instruction, which was generally most rudimentary. Saint Vincent had long been considering, on his side, how some such training could be contrived for the helpmates of the Dames de Charite, and he at once approved of Louise's plan. She wished to bind herself by a vow to this new service, and to let her house be opened at once a kind of novitiate for the Filles de Charite, as they were called; but Saint Vincent, faithful to his habit of honouring in all his doings ” the

slowness of the eternal God," bade her wait a while. The idea of hurrying one step in advance of Providence made him "shake with fear," as he said; but he consented to her "making a beginning" humbly and quietly, confident that if the scheme were good it would expand rapidly.

The four peasant women that Mlle. Legras took into her house as a beginning in the year 1633, were in reality the first novices of that community of Sisters of Chanty destined to spread over the world, like the great mustard-tree under whose shade every wayfarer sits down to rest. This new responsibility involved a great change in her manner of life. Up to this time she had so far retained her independence as to be at least complete mistress in her own house, free to invite there whom she chose, and to arrange her comings and goings according to her convenience. All this was now at an end. Her house ceased, practically, to be her own, and became the common property of a class of persons who were naturally the last that she would have chosen as daily and hourly companions women who had nothing, socially or intellectually, in common with the refined and accomplished Mlle. Legras who were constantly jarring upon her delicacy, natural and acquired, by their coarse manners and language, and total ignorance of everything but the Ten Commandments. But this single bond was enough to bridge over every other difference. They loved God and pitied the poor, and were eager to serve and help them. On this consecrated ground the lady and the peasant women met as sisters and fellow-labourers. Nor did the latter ever suspect what the partnership cost their hostess. She confessed to a dear friend that it was "a constant trial to her to see the diversity of strange faces" about her; but the most observant would not have detected this in her manner towards them.

The novitiate, as in truth it was, for all its unpretending simplicity, flourished with a rapidity that surprised even Saint Vincent. At the end of a year the number of women, maids, and widows, who applied for admittance was so great that the house was full to the attic; and Louise, in order to make room for more applicants, was obliged to dismiss her own maid, and put up beds in the room she had occupied. This sacrifice was the last left her to make in the matter of personal attendance, but there remained many others yet in the way of comfort and freedom. When every spot where a bed could stand was occupied, she shared hers with a girl who was afflicted v/ith a most repulsive infirmity, but whose piety and good will promised to make her a valuable subject to the Association.

The will of Providence being now sufficiently manifested by the success of the undertaking to satisfy even Saint Vincent's exacting patience, he recognised the necessity of giving a rule to the community; but instead of drawing up one himself, he desired Louise to do so, protesting an illness which for the moment made the effort of writing irksome to him. “I can see that God so ordains it,” he said, “in order that I may not thrust my sickle into the harvest.” Louise drew up a rule obediently, and sent it to Saint Vincent. He was well pleased with it, made some few alterations, and then proposed that the community should meet, in order to receive the new rule with fitting solemnity, and that he should make a little discourse to them on its spirit and observance.

This was the first of those Conferences of the Sisters of Charity which embody so admirably the sweet and loving spirit of Saint Vincent. Mlle. Legras and her companions, Mlle. Pollalion and Mme. Goussault, took notes of this and succeeding ones, and afterwards carefully corrected and put them together. This first conference was more like an

intimate family council, in which the father sat in the arm-chair, while his children gathered round him, asking and answering questions, giving their opinions, holding amicable little discussions on the various points under consideration, speaking out freely, but always accepting his decisions with entire docility and satisfaction.

“It strikes me,” began Saint Vincent, looking round at the group of eager faces, “that Divine Providence has gathered us all here together in order that we should honour the human life of Jesus on earth. But up to this time He has given us no fixed rule. Now in this He has treated you as He treated His own people, whom He left a thousand years from the creation without a law. He dealt in the same way with the primitive Church; for so long as Our Lord was on earth there was no written law, and it was the Apostles who, after His death, collated His teachings and ordinances. I have not yet been able to draw up a regular rule for your house, but, until it shall please God to let this be done, let us just see how you can best pass the twenty-four hours that make up the day, the weeks, the months, the years that will lead you to a happy eternity.”

In this simple, familiar way he goes on to tell them what has seemed to him and others the best way of parcelling out their time from morning till night. They are to rise at 4 A.M., and to go to bed at 9; “because,” adds Saint Vincent, by way of explaining what may seem too indulgent in this arrangement, “you see we must take care of ourselves for the service of the poor.” They are to offer their heart to God the first thing on awaking, “because the devil tries his best to turn our thoughts from God the moment we wake.” Then he would have them take flight to God on the wings of mental prayer. “Don't fancy that because you are poor ignorant girls you may not aspire to meditate. Oh, God is so good! He has called you to the exercise of charity. After that,

how could He refuse you the grace necessary to meditate! Oh! my children, never let such a thought enter your minds! Only this very day I was greatly edified by a poor village girl like yourselves, who, through her faithfulness in making her meditation, is now one of the holiest souls I know.”

He closes the subject of prayer by an exhortation to them to hear Mass with the devotion they would have felt on Mount Calvary; but assures them that if compelled to leave the Holy Sacrifice for the service of the poor, they are not to grieve as if this were a great loss, “because, my daughters, to go to the poor is to go to God. . . . Bear this in mind, and be careful to give the poor all the help you can. . . . Put up with their tempers; don t get angry with them, don't speak sharply to them. Ah! they have enough to bear in bearing their sufferings. Don't contradict them, unless it is necessary and for their good. Weep with them, pity them; God has appointed you to be their consolation.”

He tells them to be very devout to the Blessed Virgin; to look upon their superior as representing her, and then they will find obedience quite pleasant and easy. “I must tell you something about this that concerns myself,” he adds confidentially. “When God placed me at Mme. de Gondy's, as tutor to her children, I proposed to myself to look up to her as to the Blessed Virgin in person, and God only knows how much good this practice did me. Honour, therefore, the ladies who are in authority over you (the Dames de Charite), and behave towards them with great respect. Honour the sick likewise, and look upon them as your superiors.” He gave them his blessing, and they went about their day's work as usual.

This was how the Community of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded. Saint Vincent always denied that he had done it. “God founded it,” he would repeat to those who

spoke of him as the founder. And perhaps no order ever arose in whose formation the finger of God was so visibly manifested as in this Association of ignorant country girls, who came to be taught how to serve others poorer than themselves, and, gradually, without influence or protection, grew into a large community. Saint Vincent never would allow them to be considered, or to consider themselves, as nuns; they were nothing but Christian women devoting themselves to the service of the sick and the poor. “Your convent,” he said, “will be the house of the sick; your cell, a hired room; your chapel, the parish church; your cloister, the streets of the city, or the wards of the hospital; your enclosure, obedience; your grating, the fear of God; your veil, holy modesty.”

It was in truth a most daring innovation, this example of a sisterhood without veil or cloister, in an age which associated the religious life, no matter under what rule, with bars and strict enclosure, and, generally speaking, the conceal ment of the religious from even the eyes of her own family. It may have been partly out of deference to these conventional notions of the age which made Saint Vincent refuse to allow the new sisterhood to adopt any costume that could make them look like nuns, and scandalize the world in whose midst they were to walk about helping and serving. He continually repeated to them through succeeding years, at the weekly conferences, that they had never been “founded” at all; they had been brought together by God's Providence and their own good will in the great needs of the poor; it had come about simply and casually. “God alone made your Association,” he says in one of these familiar talks to them. “We never had a fixed plan about it. How could any one have imagined that there would be Filles de Charite when the first few among you came up from your villages to help in some of the parishes in Paris? Oh! my children, don't believe it. Neither I nor your sister

servant (Mlle. Legras) ever thought of such a thing. You see, it was God Himself who thought it for you."

And yet, for all his desire to keep them lowly, and his constant allusion to their ignorance and their unpretending condition, Saint Vincent treats the Filles de Charite with the most profound deference. Very different is his language, in speaking of them, from that in which he speaks of the priests of his own mission. The dignity of their calling, i.e., the service of the poor, placed them, in his eyes, on a pedestal of sub lime grandeur. "These most noble women," "those admirable servants of Jesus Christ," are the terms in which he commonly alludes to the "poor ignorant peasant girls"; while for his missionaries, who are carrying the Word of God to the ends of the world, courting martyrdom, and often obtaining it, he has nothing but the language of humility and contempt. "Our mean little Society," "our beggarly Community," "noire gueuserie," are his favourite expressions in speaking of the Brotherhood of which he was the undisputed founder.

The erection of the Filles de Charite into an organised body, working under direction, and following a rule, was a great event, and at once enlarged the sphere of their usefulness. The Hotel Dieu in Paris was in need of reform amounting to a total reorganisation of, its internal system. It held over a thousand patients, and some five-and-thirty thousand were harboured there during the year. The Augustinian nuns who served the hospital had, so far, been unable to cope with the tremendous difficulties that stood in the way of the most urgent reforms; it had taken them twenty years to obtain the elementary concession of a separate bed for every patient. Here was a field for the services of the Filles de Charite, trained as they were to the care of the sick, and in high favour with the Queen, and therefore likely to enlist her interest in behalf of the ill-managed hospital. But when the

matter was proposed to Saint Vincent, he hesitated, as was his way, doubtful as to whether it was wise or fair to intrude upon the province of the Augustinian Sisters, hitherto charged solely with the service and management of the hospital. These scruples were, however, overruled by Mgr. de Gondy, Archbishop of Paris, and at his desire Saint Vincent consented to the Dames de Charite engaging themselves to attend regularly at the hospital. He enjoined upon them the utmost discretion and humility in their intercourse with the Sisters, to whom they were to defer as to persons in authority over them, and worthy of all respect.

Mlle. Legras found the task of propitiating the Sisters an easy one. They welcomed her proffered assistance with gratitude, and gave her and her companions the support of their know ledge and experience in dealing with the wards. Louise appointed four of her best subjects among the Filles de Charite to the service of the Hotel Dieu; and so ardent was their zeal in the work, that Saint Vincent was obliged to interfere in order to moderate it, lest their strength should give way. But this excess of fervour delighted his heart. “Oh! let us thank Our Lord,” he writes to Louise, “for giving our good girls the grace to be so generous and willing in His service!”

The zeal of the Filles de Charite was, no doubt, encouraged by the example of the Dames de Charite, who entered on their arduous task with a generosity that was truly admirable. They were six visitors to begin with, and at the end of a month their number had increased to a hundred and twenty. Amongst these were many of the noblest ladies of the court, prin cesses and duchesses, who drove to the Hotel Dieu in their cumbrous, emblazoned coaches, and, covering their silk brocades with a coarse white apron, performed the duties of nurses in the wards with the utmost efficiency and the most unshrinking courage. They brought

dain ties and cordials to the sick, and administered them with their own hands, spending hours every day in the foul and dense atmosphere of the wards. A lovely group they were, these Dames de Charite, that Louise drew in her train from their marble halls to the bedside of the suffering and forsaken ones. There was Mme. Goussault, the widow of the President, young and beautiful, and with the voice of a siren, so sweet that when she sang canticles on her way through the villages visiting the poor with other Dames de Charite, the labourers stood to listen, and threw down their spades and followed the singer like men bewitched by the spell of sweet music.

Another charming figure is that of the young Duchess de Liancourt, long the devoted friend of Louise, and parted from her by the subtle poison of the Port-Royal sophistries a parting that Louise reckoned amongst the keenest pains of her life.

The Association of the Filles de Charite grew henceforth with a rapidity that soon called for fresh means of expansion and guidance. The crowd of those who came to be trained was so great that numbers were continually waiting for admittance, and Mlle. Legras was obliged to let many leave whom she would gladly have retained longer under her care. It was evident that some larger place must be found to receive them, as the house in the Rue Saint Sauveur was now far too small to satisfy the rapidly growing demands for accommodation. Saint Vincent admitted the need of a centre where something like community life might be carried on; but he still shrank from giving the Sisterhood anything like the character of a religious order. It had grown to its present proportions without any much more localised centre than the birds of the air. Mlle. Legras's house was a kind of parent-nest, where the young fledglings were nurtured until they were taught to fly; but as soon as their

wings were strong enough to bear them alone, they departed, to make room for a new brood, and alighted where they could, making a nest for themselves in some poor house in a poor neighbourhood, and coming and going thence to their work. It had seemed to Saint Vincent that this spontaneity and simplicity and absence of all pretension in the character of the Association were essential to its preservation and perfection; he dreaded the least outward assumption of importance on the part of the members, as keenly as ever sainted founder dreaded the creeping paralysis of relaxation of the Rule. But the fact was forced upon him at last that his “bonnes filles” could not live thus scattered and isolated, “coming and going, and full of goodwill and love of the poor,” without the control and protection of some material organisation.

Mlle. Legras had long felt that there must be some one central house, larger than her own, and she finally converted Saint Vincent to the same opinion, and won his consent to their taking a house in the village of La Chapelle, near enough to Saint Lazare for easy communication between him and the community, and sufficiently spacious and unpretending to answer the material and moral conditions to be observed in the home of “poor girls, the servants of the poor.”

It was a rambling old farmhouse, situated in the midst of fields, and thus admirably suited to the “children of the fields” who were to inhabit it. They took possession of this abode in the month of May 1636; a note written by Mlle. Legras on a stray sheet of paper records the event, and adds that they made this change of residence “in the spirit of honouring Jesus and Mary on their way from Bethlehem to Egypt and other places, and with no more desire than they to have a fixed abode on earth.”

Louise made a retreat of six days on coming to La Chapelle, and she derived such comfort and strength from it that she resolved to enable others to enjoy the same benefit. For this purpose she set apart two rooms, which were to be at the disposal of any of the Dames de Charite who wished to come there at anytime for a week's rest and meditation. Several hastened to take advantage of this opportunity and be instructed in spiritual things by the pupil of so holy a master, and whose characteristic advice to them was “to live in all simplicity and innocent familiarity with Our Lord.”

Quietly as the community had hitherto gone to work, and closely as both they and Saint Vincent drew round them the veil of humility and obscurity, the praise and gaze of the world followed them wheresoever they went, and proclaimed their works before men. They were wanted everywhere, in homes and hospitals and prisons; and wherever they were wanted they went. They had not been two months settled at La Chapelle when they were sent for to nurse the soldiers wounded in the sudden invasion of the Spanish army under John of Worth. Anne of Austria visited Louise and her Sisters, and showed them great honour. Court ladies, encouraged by the Queen's example, became munificent patronesses of the Charities. One of them, the Duchess d Aiguillon, a noble type of the Christian in the world, being in failing health, entreated Saint Vincent to let her have two Filles de Charite to wait upon her personally. Saint Vincent, though reluctant to make the precedent, consented out of gratitude for the Duchess's benefactions, and in consideration of her great piety, to let her have one; but when he desired Soeur Marie Denyse to go to her, she replied, “I left my father and mother to serve the poor for the love of God, and I will not leave them to go and serve a great lady.” Saint Vincent, delighted with the spirit that dictated the refusal, sent for Soeur Barbe, a soul of marvellous humility, who signed herself “Barbe l'orgueilleuse,” believing herself to be a very demon of

pride. Barbe burst into tears, and declared she should not know how to serve a duchess, but yielded at last to Saint Vincent's gentle entreaties, and went to the great lady's house. But when she saw the splendour of the place, with its marbles and pictures and gilded ceilings and silken hangings, she was seized with terror, and ran away back to Saint Vincent, and, falling at his feet, implored him to let her stay with the poor. We can well imagine how it gladdened the Saint's heart to see his children so true to the spirit of their vocation. He writes to Mlle. Legras, quite elated, “Are you not enchanted to see the spirit of God so strong in these two poor girls, and inspiring them with such contempt for the world and its grandeurs? You can t think what courage this has given me for the Charity!”

Soeur Barbe had her heart's desire for the moment. She was let off serving the Duchess, and sent back to the slums and the hospital, and was soon after promoted to a post of honour in a village outside Paris, where a terrible epidemic, resembling the plague, had broken out, and where her medical skill highly valued in those days, when the barber's lancet was still the universal remedy made her self-devotion doubly service able.

Wonderful was the change which within twelve years had now been wrought by the joint efforts of Saint Vincent and Mlle. Legras in the condition of the poor all over the kingdom. They were no longer left “to rot before they were put into their coffin,” to borrow the expression of a chronicler of the times, but were nursed back to health, or at least furnished with such merciful alleviations as robbed of their worst horrors the infirmities and diseases that afflicted them. This was much for the son of a peasant, aided by one lone widow woman, to have done, and yet they were only at the beginning of the work they were destined to accomplish.

The excess of criminal pauperism in the seventeenth century had engendered no more horrible result than the destruction of new-born infants and little children a crime which prevailed in those days to an extent that would be incredible, were it not proved past denial by the statistics of the period. These official reports show that from three to four hundred babies were thrown out into the streets of Paris every year to die of cold and hunger or to take their chance of being picked up by the police and taken to La Couche. La Couche seems to have been a sort of authorized refuge, where the poor little outcasts were taken in when any one took the trouble to carry them there. Here a still more miserable lot awaited them than that from which they were thus rescued by chance. In the streets they had but to die and go to heaven. At La Couche their wretched little lives were preserved long enough to endure accumulated sufferings of every description; and if they survived these first miseries of infancy, it was at the risk of far worse future evils to soul and body. Happily, the great majority of them died off quickly. The woman who had the sole management of the house could not, even had she been so inclined, have given proper care to the multitude of babies that kept pouring in upon her; there were no nurses to give them their natural nourishment, and when their cries for sustenance became too tiresome, the woman quieted them with a drug, and sent them off to heaven in their sleep. The more robust, who made a fight for it, and determined to live, were disposed of in various ways. Some were sold for ten-pence apiece to beggars, who used them as a means of exciting charity, and so getting alms; others were bought by families who wanted an heir; and there was a belief current at the time, and supported by much contemporary evidence, that numbers of these little forsaken creatures were sold to necromancers, who used their blood in the practices of the black art.

This emporium of cruelty and crime had been carrying on its hideous trade, not alone with impunity, but under the ostensible protection of the law, when God sent Saint Vincent to denounce its abominations and rescue the little children. He was returning late one winter's evening to Saint Lazare, when he was arrested by yells of infantile distress proceeding from a doorway. He hastened to the spot, and found a beggar in the act of breaking the limbs of a baby of some months old. “Monster!” cried the dear old Saint, “I mistook you for a human being!” and he snatched the baby from the beggar, and carried it in his arms through the streets, relating to the passers-by, with tears in his eyes, the barbarous torture that the poor little wailing thing had been subjected to. The people listened, and walked on with him, fired with his compassion and his holy anger. By the time they reached La Couche a large crowd had gathered. Saint Vincent entered the house, never dreaming of the sort of place it was. One glance showed him enough to make his heart sink and his soul recoil with horror. There was nothing for it, however, but to hand over the baby from his cherishing arms to the tender mercies of the matron. It was too late that night to do anything, but next morning he hurried off to Mlle. Legras, and begged her to go at once to La Couche, and examine more closely the establishment of which last night's glimpse had given him but too true an impression. The spectacle that revealed itself to Louise made her stand aghast with loathing and dismay. “The fate of the innocents massacred by Herod was infinitely more merciful than that of those confided to La Couche!” was her report. And it was decided at once that immediate measures must be taken to remedy the condition of the cast-aways. Saint Vincent was for carrying the lot off bodily, straightway; but this being practicably impossible, they determined to begin by taking away twelve. Saint Vincent wept bitterly as, after invoking the Holy Ghost, he cast lots for the ones who were to be rescued. Some charitable friends came to their

assistance. The lady visitors of the Hotel Dieu gave money to supply the immediate wants, a house and nurses to receive the infants. A pious widow, named Mlle. Pelletier, undertook the management of the house, and Louise went herself to reside there for a few weeks in order to set the thing going, to regulate the expenses, and draw up necessary rules for the nurses. Once the work was started, and the charity of the public enlisted, money poured in, and week after week Saint Vincent went to La Couche and drew lots for new babies. His dear heart could not rest under the thought of what they were suffering in that foul and cruel abode. For, indeed, he knew no peace ever since that evening when he found the little baby in the doorway. He was perpetually prowling about after dark in the most disreputable quarters, on the look-out for other victims, his ears strained for the sound of their piteous cries. When he was late coming home to Saint Lazare, the Fathers would say, “He is looking for babies!” And so he was. Many a time he came home with the two huge pockets of his shabby old soutane filled each with a baby. It was always at night that he found them. The thieves and criminal paupers had the streets to themselves after dark, and he was a rash man who ventured out alone in their midst; but Saint Vincent was safe; the kind, worn face, with the eager, glancing eyes, was familiar to them all, and no one ever dreamed of molesting him. Once, however, on a dark night, he was seized and roughly handled by some good-for-nothing fellows; but when he told them he was “only Monsieur Vincent,” they fell on their knees and begged his pardon, and asked his blessing.

This new work of the Foundling Refuge was to Mlle. Legras a tremendous addition of fatigue and responsibility. Well might Saint Vincent exclaim, “Here is business for you, all these little ones to look after and keep accounts for!” So long as the money came in, she was willing enough to keep account of it; the worst trouble arose when the money began

to fall short; for the number of the babies went on steadily increasing. As it so often happens in under takings of the kind, the first impulse of enthusiasm which had floated the work stopped short; gifts and alms grew less abundant, and by degrees almost ceased altogether, and Mlle. Legras was sorely perplexed how to support the burden she had laid upon herself. Accommodation had run short in the house that had been hired, and instead of taking a larger one, and so keeping the foundlings under her own watchful eye, she was thankful to distribute them all over the country to respectable women who, for a small retribution, were willing to take charge of them.

While thus devoting herself to the children of others, Louise was not neglecting or overlooking her own child. Acting under the advice of Saint Vincent, she had withdrawn him from the Seminary, and placed him for a time under the care of M. Bourdoise. From here he went to the Jesuits, where he seems to have given tolerable satisfaction, and to have again raised hopes of a vocation for the priesthood. But two months saw the end of the passing phase, and Michel grew weary of theology, and impatient to leave Paris. Louise was terrified at the mere thought of his going away from under her eye and Saint Vincent's. “Let him go,” said the wise old Saint, in answer to her cry of alarm. “If all those who have to go away from their parents eye were in danger of being lost, where should I be?” he asked, treating her terrors with playful irony; and he sent “little Michel,” as he persisted in calling the tall, grown lad, away with some missionaries to a friend whom he wrote to, praying him to receive the boy, and “occupy him in some way, so that idleness, the mother of all the vices, should not bring him into mischief.”

This continued fickleness of purpose made his mother very unhappy, and when at last the boy definitely renounced all idea of the priesthood, she accused herself and her own

unworthiness of being the cause of the disappointment, and saw in it a judgment of God upon her for her sins. “Never did I see such a woman as you!” says Saint Vincent, combating as usual this exaggerated mistrust of herself; “you ought to remember that the faults of children are not imputed to parents when these latter have had them instructed and given them good example, as you have done, God be praised!” He quotes examples from Scripture and the lives of the saints to reassure her, but Louise continued hard to con sole. “In God's name,” implores Saint Vincent, “leave your child to the care of his Heavenly Father, who loves him better than you do.”

As Michel's destiny lies outside that portion of his mother's life which chiefly interests us, we may as well mention here that after being for some years more a thorn in her heart and a constant source of anxiety, he married a charming young wife, “chosen for him by God Himself,” says Louise, in her deep joy and thankfulness; and after this he settled down satisfactorily, and became in due course the father of a little girl, who was the delight of her grandmother, and a source of great interest to the whole family of the Filles de Charite.

In the year 1639, Mlle. Legras lost her dear friend and valiant fellow-labourer, Mme. Goussault. The last words of this noble woman were a prayer to Louise on behalf of the sick poor of Angers, where the hospital was in grievous need of reform. She entreated her to go and help them; and no sooner had the grave closed over her than Louise set out for Angers, in order to fulfill the request that she looked upon as a dying legacy from her friend. The fame of Mlle. Legras holiness had now spread far and wide; and as soon as it was known that she was approaching Angers, two of the chief notabilities of the place went out to meet her, and, without allowing her to pay her first customary visit to the church and the Hotel Dieu, they insisted on carrying her off to a

supper prepared in her honour, and to which the most important personages of the town were invited to meet her. This was bad enough, but on her way through the streets she was the object of a veritable ovation, of which she complained angrily to Saint Vincent in a letter next day. “They treated me as if I were a great person,” she exclaims, aggrieved and indignant; and Saint Vincent seems to have been more amused than sympathetic on the occasion, for he urges her “to bear the annoyance with becoming patience.”

This ordeal was followed next by visits so early and so numerous from the dignitaries and their wives that it was with difficulty Louise at last escaped to the hospital. She found it in a state of neglect and discomfort which fully justified the prayer of her dying friend to “go and do something for the poor sick there.” The work of reform, always an arduous one, was made less difficult by the entire confidence Mlle. Legras herself inspired, and the extra ordinary good-will of the inhabitants, high and low. There was more to be done, however, she quickly discovered, than the re-organization of the hospital. The spiritual wants of the poor were quite unprovided for, and the most deplorable ignorance of Christian doctrine prevailed amongst them. Mlle. Legras opened a class Catechism, and went about inviting the poor to send their children to be instructed. They responded with the greatest alacrity to the invitation, and not only sent their children, but came themselves, and at the end of a week the success of the class was so remarkable that educated people crowded in to hear the instructions. Amongst them were several priests, one of whom declared to Louise that he would consider himself happy if he might but end his days in serving her, with no other reward than to hear the words of wisdom that fell from her lips. “If you stayed here a year, you would convert the whole town!” exclaimed an old woman to her one day, coming out from the Catechism class.

No wonder Mlle. Legras took fright at all this. “Father,” she writes to Saint Vincent, “pray God to bring down my pride by any means He pleases! I am ready to lose all and leave all to obtain humility, which is better than every other good and consolation.”

No one else who knew her was alarmed for her humility. She was so simple and natural that a movement of vanity seemed as foreign to her as to a little child. In conversing with the poor, her manner was that of an equal who knew no more about things than they did, but who was trying with them to learn what was right and good. When the authorities were claiming every moment of her time to arrange the affairs of the hospital, she would stay talking to the poor, listening to their tiresome, long-winded complaints with every appearance of the deepest interest and as if her time were wholly at their disposal. One poor old woman whom she went to see begged of her to play a game of back gammon with her, and Mlle. Legras at once consented, and sat down and rattled away with the dice-box for a whole hour, as if she, too, were glad to have something to kill the time.

The wisdom, firmness, and practical ability displayed by Mlle. Legras in the difficult task of recasting the existing conditions of the large hospital were eliciting, meantime, the warmest admiration and gratitude both from the authorities and the patients who were benefiting already by her administration. The most important step taken was the installation of eight Filles de Charite in the hospital itself. This arrangement, which grouped a number of them in one permanent abode, inaugurated at last that community life so necessary for the observance of a Rule and so helpful in the carrying on of a common vocation an advantage which the Filles de Charite had hitherto only enjoyed during the short period of their residence at La Chapelle, while being

trained to their duties of sick-nurses. Once they left that sheltering wing, they lodged where they could, in hired rooms, sometimes singly, sometimes in twos and threes. Marvellous, indeed, must have been the strength and vitality of the vocations that had so long withstood the dangers and difficulties of this scattered and unprotected manner of life. It was a most desirable measure, the establishing the Sisters under the authority of the municipality as recognised servants of the sick poor, and with a local superior of their own.

Louise drew up for the community some rules specially adapted to their duties towards the sick, and which, spontaneous and simple like all her utterances, written or spoken, breathe the spirit of entire self-sacrifice, humility, and simplicity that so strongly marks the likeness between her soul and that of Saint Vincent. The Sisters were to rise at 4 A.M., and, after taking “a little bread and wine” (except on Communion days, when they were to “smell some vinegar instead”), they were to begin their service by making the beds of the sick, cleaning and tidying the wards, administering the medicines, and giving the patients their breakfast. The rules included minute instructions for the attendance and comfort of the sick throughout the day, such as ” keeping in readiness cooling-drinks and pleasant lozenges to refresh them when their lips were hot.” All these changes had taken time to accomplish, and given much mental anxiety, as well as great physical fatigue, to Mlle. Legras; but things being finally got into good working order, she was ready to take her departure from Angers. The community, in despair at the prospect of the separation, entreated her to let her portrait be taken, that they might keep it as a consolation for losing her presence. Willing as she was to indulge every reasonable request of her children, Louise could not be persuaded to grant this one, which, it

seemed to her, would involve a foolish loss of time and money

Everything was ready for her departure, when it was suddenly arrested by the news that the plague had broken out. She at once renounced the idea of going away, and gave herself up to the service of the sick. The example of her courage and self-devotion stimulated her Sisters, who went nobly to work, touching the plague-stricken, inhaling their poisonous breath, risking their lives, as if unconscious of danger and inaccessible to fear. Louise exulted with a holy pride at the sight of their courageous charity, though her heart quaked with motherful terrors on their behalf. But God watched over the little community, not one of whom caught the terrible malady. The severe moral and physical strain proved, however, too much for Louise, exhausted already by previous fatigues. She fell ill, and the report spread to Paris that it was the plague. The consternation and grief of her friends were indescribable. Saint Vincent was, fortunately, reassured at once as to the nature of the illness, and was thus free to take pleasure in these evidences of the universal esteem in which his child was held. “I wish you could have seen the tenderness of the ladies of the Hotel Dieu when they heard it!” he writes to her; and then, after the father, the Saint speaks, and he gives thanks for her sufferings. “I trust that through His goodness He will be glorified by this illness as by so many others. I ask this of Him incessantly here, and there, and wherever I am. How I wish He would let you see with what heart everybody is praying for you!”

To the venerable Abbe Vaux, whose hospitality Louise had enjoyed during her stay at Angers, and whose guest she still was, Saint Vincent writes with the gratitude of a father to one who has befriended his child. “I cannot thank you humbly or lovingly enough for the unparalleled charity that you are exercising towards Mlle. Legras. I thank you as I can,

Monsieur, and I pray Our Lord, for whose sake you are doing it all, that He may be Himself your thanks and your reward. . . . And so she is ill again, this dear lady! In nomine Domini…. I do not commend her to you, Monsieur; your letter proves how much you have her welfare at heart, and hers proves the same, v Would that I were there to set your goodness free from all the trouble it has taken upon itself! But Our Lord wishes to add this merit to the crown He is making ready for you."

The illness lasted for two months, during which time Louise continued from her sick-bed the guidance of the community and the direction of the various works she had set going. Her presence was, indeed, more needed than ever, for the whole strength of the workers had gone co-combating the ravages of the plague, and had strained their powers and resources to the utmost. As soon as her exhausted state of health permitted it, she took leave of the kind Abbe Vaux, accepting, in obedience to Saint Vincent, the coach of a friend as far as Tours, where she was "thankful to get out of it," and exchange the luxuriant conveyance for the discomfort and poverty of a common cart, in which she jolted slowly on to Paris.

Her health never recovered the effects of this illness. From this time forth (1640) to the day of her death, twenty years afterwards, she lived, according to Saint Vincent, "against all human appearance, and by a sustained miracle." She herself acknowledged to one of her Sisters that she went blindly on, dragging her body after her by sheer strength of will, and kept up solely by the conviction that so long as God had work for her to do He would give her strength to do it.

This community at Angers, now prominently placed before the world, independent and responsible, became henceforth one of her chief preoccupations, while it was at the same

time a source of courage and consolation to her. The admirable conduct of the young Sisters during the plague, together with the marvellous protection displayed towards them throughout, made her say that “the Sisters of Angers had evidently a special grace from God for the service of the sick in the hospitals.” She continued, nevertheless, to watch over them anxiously from a distance, keeping up a regular correspondence with their chaplain, the Abbe Vaux, and playfully rebuking him for “flattering her motherly pride” by always singing the praises of the Sisters, and never saying a word about their faults.

The remembrance of her refusal to let them have her portrait taken smote her with remorse, and she accused herself to Saint Vincent of having been unkind and ungrateful to them. “Every little bourgeoise gets her portrait painted,” she said, “and after death it is put over her tomb in the church. I am very sorry I refused to let mine be taken. I daresay it was from a false humility of not liking to seem vain enough to have myself painted, whereas the true humility would have been in condescending to have it done.”

The work of the Confraternity continued tc grow in every direction, and the house at La Chapelle was no longer large enough to accommodate the Sisters, who kept steadily increasing in numbers. After much searching, another house was found, which, while considerably more spacious, had the advantage of being close to Saint Lazare, the home of the Mission. But the more the community increased the more the demands upon it grew. The new house soon became the centre to which all the poor and sick of the city betook themselves for help; on the other hand, money, food, medicine, and alms of every sort, flowed in to meet these demands, and all who were willing to help in works of charity came to offer their services, and put themselves under the guidance of Mlle. Legras.

Up to this time the Filles de la Charite had held catechism classes in the various parishes where they worked; but Mlle. Legras now opened, for the first time, a regular day-school for children, where they were taught reading and writing and sewing, as well as their catechism. It was necessary to instruct the Sisters themselves, in the first instance, so as to qualify them for teaching in the school. The task was arduous, but the results were wonderful. Louise was constantly amazed by the rapid progress which these dull, uneducated village girls made under her instructions, and inspired by the ardour of their own good-will. Many, who began by learning the alphabet from her, and to whom she had ” to explain the Pater and the Credo, article by article,” proved pupils worthy of Saint Jerome, so ardent and humble was the spirit with which they received the instruction imparted to them, and so admirably taught were they by the Spirit of God. Their virtue and discretion filled Louise with admiration, and she writes to Saint Vincent, ” Had the great Doctor [Saint Jerome] lived in these days, he would have written the lives of these poor country girls, and filled the world with their praises.”

And yet the Association had developed to this point without the salutary, and seemingly essential, restraint of vows. The Filles de la Charite worked on from day to day, free to abandon their manner of life without the sin of apostasy or any breach of a distinct pledge. They had carried their services all over the country, bound, so far, by their own free-will alone. The idea of consecrating themselves by vow came to them naturally and spontaneously, after the fashion so dear to Saint Vincent himself. He was discoursing to them one day about the joy it was to Our Lord when souls were generous enough to bind themselves irrevocably to Him in the service of “our masters, the poor,” and his words were so full of unction that several of the Sisters were there and then filled with the desire to make vows. When the discourse was

over, they asked him if they might do so. He smiled, and went on to enlarge on the beauty of such a consecration, and to explain to them the distinction between solemn and simple vows, remarking that he never would authorize their taking solemn vows, as this would make nuns of them, “and a nun means the cloister, and gratings, and many other things incompatible with your vocation.”

The impulse was, with his consent, carried out some days later by five of the Sisters, including Mlle. Legras. It was done very quietly, without any ceremonial; they received Holy Communion and silently made their vow to serve Jesus in the person of the poor for one year. The title of Soeur Servante was bestowed on the superior some little while afterwards, and in the same unpremeditated way. Saint Vincent went to visit a convent of Annonciades one day, and he heard the Sisters call their superior Ancilla. He came to see the Filles de Charite in the afternoon, and said, “I at once thought of you. From this forth you shall call your superior Soeur Servante.”

He had never permitted them to adopt any costume of their own, but desired that they should retain the one common to the peasant women of the period, which consisted in a gown of coarse grey woollen stuff, and for headgear a close-fitting linen cap. Some of the country girls, who had been accustomed to wear kerchiefs or hoods over this, complained of the cold, and asked leave to wear a woollen veil; but Saint Vincent, fearing, apparently, that anything like a veil might lead to a resemblance to nuns, desired them to adopt instead the somewhat complicated structure of stiff white linen which was then worn by the peasants in certain provinces, and which, though abandoned by the peasantry, has remained ever since the distinctive head-dress of the Soeurs grises. Saint Vincent held so strongly to this primitive costume, characteristic of the humble origin of

the Sisters, that when Louise proposed some slight modification for the sake of convenience, he would not hear of it. “Let no one,” he said, “persuade you to make the least change in your grey gown and your cornette”

The Association, although it had grown to an important position both in the Church and the social community, had as yet received neither bull from the Holy See nor letters patent from the Crown; it was still a volunteer corps, free to disperse as it had come into life. Saint Vincent had, so far, been its guide and director; but it had not bound itself to maintain the bond which united it to him, nor had he, on his side, engaged himself or his successors in the Mission to continue to direct it. Mlle. Legras had long been endeavouring to induce him to appoint the superiors of the Mission as superiors of the Filles de Charite, but he refused to assume this responsibility until Providence should have made manifest the necessity of the step. As the Association grew, it became clear to him that some provision of this kind was necessary, and that if he died before it was made, the Association would find itself painfully and perilously isolated. He was advanced in years and his health was broken with infirmities, and Mlle. Legras became more and more urgent with him to place the Filles de Charite under the permanent protection of the Fathers. “For God's sake,” she writes to him, “let nothing be done, or left undone, which might furnish the faintest pretext for withdrawing the Society from the direction that God has given it; for be assured the moment it ceases to be what it is, the sick poor will no longer be assisted, and then, I do believe, the will of God will no longer be in the midst of us.”

Saint Vincent agreed with all she said, but still he hesitated. This hesitation was very trying to Louise. Every time he fell ill and these occasions grew more and more frequent she trembled for the life of the Confraternity. It seemed as if his

life were the foundation on which it rested, and that it must fall when he fell. Saint Vincent, seeing, perhaps, a certain weakness of faith in these alarms, rebuked her, and prolonged the trial. “You are still too full of human feeling,” he writes, half playfully; “you think everything is lost when I am ill. Oh, woman of little faith! why have you not more trust and acquiescence in the guidance and example of Jesus Christ? The Saviour of the world trusted to God, His Father, for the state of the whole Church, and you, for a handful of women manifestly raised up and brought together by His Providence, cannot trust, but think He will fail you! Get along with you, Mademoiselle, and humble yourself very much before God!” Louise, no doubt, humbled herself as desired; but she resolved at the same time on taking a bold step. The Abbe Portail, the confessor of the community, and Saint Vincent's own right hand and coadjutor, was going to Rome, and Mlle. Legras entrusted him with a letter to the Holy Father, asking for his blessing on the Confraternity and a plenary indulgence for the Sisters at the hour of death. The Abbe Portail duly delivered the letter, and the answer proved how well known the work of the Filles de Charite was to the Father of the faithful. “Although,” it said, “his Holiness is not in the habit of granting such an indulgence to so many persons at a time, he willingly derogates from his custom out of consideration for your efforts on behalf of the sick poor. All your Sisters at present living will partake of this grace.”

Great was the joy amongst the Filles de Chariie when this blessing came to them from Innocent X. Mlle. Legras was now more content to let Saint Vincent and patience have their perfect work, and to wait for that sign of God's pleasure that was so slow in coming to him. Meantime, the burden of her twofold motherhood was pressing heavily upon her. The Foundling Asylum, which from the first had claimed a special share in her maternal love, was causing her serious

uneasiness. The house of La Couche had been emptied many times of its unhappy little inmates, but it still remained open; new victims continued daily to be taken there, and Saint Vincent kept casting lots and carrying away babies as fast as he could. The journal of the community tells us with touching naivete of the old Saint's persevering hunt after the little outcasts, and the Sisters share in the work of mercy. Two of them always sat up of nights to be ready to take in any perishing little waif that was brought to them. At eleven o clock one night Saint Vincent arrived with a couple of babies in his pockets “one about six days old, the other rather more. The poor little things were crying. Sister S gave them to a nurse.”

“25 January – We waited late last night, but M. Vincent did not come. The streets are deep in snow.”

“26 January – Poor M. Vincent came late, perished with the cold; he brought us a baby; this one has been weaned. It has fair hair, and a mark on its arm.”

And so on, night after night, through the dark, cold winter. The journal describes “M. Vincent running at once to see the little ones,” the moment he comes in. “It is wonderful to see his sweet ways with the little things, and the wee creatures listen to him as if they understood, as if he were their father. I saw him shed tears over a little dead baby. It is an angel,” he said, but it is hard not to see it any more. This continued flow of babies necessitated a corresponding flow of money; and though the work was, perhaps, more popular in Paris than any other of the period, this very popularity was fatal to it. People thought that “every body” gave, and the consequence was there came a moment when scarcely anybody gave. Saint Vincent had appealed to the Queen, and Anne of Austria, herself recently a mother, made a generous response. She handed over for the present use of

the foundlings the splendid Chdteau de Bicetre, built by Charles V, and lately restored by Louis XIII; and to this she added a grant of four thousand francs annually, which brought the revenue of the asylum up to twelve thousand francs: But the expenses were forty thousand, and the difference had to be made up by Saint Vincent and Mlle. Legras. With great difficulty they had staggered on under the burden up to this time; but when it became known that the Queen had so munificently endowed the house, public charity turned quite aside, and flowed in other directions, and Louise was left almost without help from any one. A moment came when her brave heart sank in despair. “I fear me that we shall have to give up the service of these little ones,” she wrote to Saint Vincent; “God's will be done! This magnificent place, which people imagine to be the property of the children, is a severe tax upon our time and resources.”

She had borrowed money where it was possible, and was now in debt on all sides. The nurses were losing patience at being kept without pay, and were bringing back the babies, and the little creatures were pining away for want of their natural sustenance. Louise again and again emptied the purse of the community to help them; but the demand went on increasing, and she knew not where to turn. Saint Vincent, broken-hearted, but full of trust in the ultimate help of Providence, called a meeting of the Dames de Charite, and addressed them in a discourse that has remained famous. He began by drawing a true and vivid picture of the condition of the foundlings when the charity of his hearers came to their rescue. “And now, madames,” he continued, “pity moved you to adopt these little creatures for your children; you became their mothers according to grace, when their natural mothers abandoned them. Consider if you, too, are now going to abandon them. Cease to be their mothers, and be their judges: their life and death are in your hands. I am going to take your votes: it is time to pronounce

sentence on them, and to know if you mean to have no further mercy on them. They will live if you continue to care for them in your charity; they will infallibly die and perish if you forsake them. Experience leaves you no room for doubt on this point."

His voice broke again and again as he uttered this appeal, and the tears were streaming down his face before he ended it. His emotion was contagious. The sentence was immediately pronounced, and it was a merciful one. The compassion of the Dames de Charite was re kindled, and alms poured in plentifully. After a while, indeed, the flow slackened again, but never so completely as before. Meantime Mlle. Legras, taught by experience not to trust too much to these generous impulses, organised, while it lasted, a variety of ways and means for the support of the work. She got leave to place poor-boxes in all the churches, and bound the Dames de Charite to make collections amongst their friends at stated periods, and opened a depot where the Filles de Charite made and sold sweetmeats and preserves for the benefit of the foundlings.

This peaceful battle that Saint Vincent and his children were waging thus perseveringly against suffering and vice was suddenly broken in upon by a warfare of a very different kind. The Fronde had long been disturbing the peace of the country, but at last things came to a terrible crisis. When the President, Broussel, was arrested, the people rose in rebellion, and in a few hours Paris was bristling with twelve hundred barricades. The Queen, acting under Mazarin's advice, fled with the court to Saint Germain, and blockaded Paris. The miseries of the population during the siege were too manifold and terrible to be described. Provisions soon ran short, and the starving and exasperated people made raids upon every public building where there was a chance of finding anything to eat. Saint Vincent's heart was torn

with compassion at the sight of all this misery, added to the calamities inflicted by the army of the Queen without and that of the Fronde within the city. The Queen held him in great affection, and he believed her incapable of doing anything deliberately to afflict her people; he believed that she was misled by evil councillors, and that if he could see her and tell her the true state of things, she would draw away her troops and come to terms with the Parliament and the Princes who were at the head of the Fronde, and dismiss Mazarin, now odious to the whole country. He said nothing to anybody except his priests and Louise, so as not to compromise others, but stole out of Paris one dark morning in January (1648), and, after traversing many perils, for the soldiers were on the watch to pick off all unwary persons, he reached Saint Germain at ten o clock at night, foot-sore and hungry and exhausted. The Queen received him most kindly, and listened to all he had to say, and then sent him in to Mazarin for his answer. The minister heard the old priest with profound respect, and bowed him out without any answer at all. Sad in heart, and wearied in body, Saint Vincent left Saint Germain, but, instead of attempting to re-enter Paris, he took refuge in a neighbouring village, where he devoted himself for a while to the poor and the sick, and then went on to visit some of the Charities.

Meantime the report had spread that M. Vincent had gone to excite the Queen against the rebels. The mob, enraged, attacked Saint Lazare, sacked the house from garret to cellar, and carried off all they could find. The neighbouring abode of the Filles de Charite was not molested, but they lived in constant terror of a similar fate, identified as they were with Saint Vincent in the minds of the infuriated populace. Sisters had flocked from every part of Paris, and even the environs, to take refuge at the mother-house when the siege became imminent, and Mlle. Legras had to find food and shelter for this immense community at a time when

there was great difficulty in providing for the ordinary inmates of the house and for the foundlings. Everything was at famine price, and even the rich could not procure bread. Added to these material trials were the dangers that beset the Sisters by day and by night from the troops and from the malefactors, who ran riot amidst the terror and anarchy that prevailed throughout the city. In the midst of this reign of disorder, Louise, by nature so timid, rose above all fear, and by her calm self-possession inspired courage in those around her. She and her Sisters performed prodigies of helpfulness in nursing the wounded soldiers, who were being carried in to them all day, and very often through the night.

The Fronde came to an end, and Saint Vincent returned to Paris; but the cessation of civil war brought no truce to the anxieties and labours of the Filles de Charite. The long war with Spain and Austria drew a heavy burden of distress in its wake, and, by driving the population towards the capital, added greatly to the disasters born of the civil war there. Whole villages had been burned down, churches plundered, and every kind of savagery committed by the invading armies. The fields had been left untilled; famine followed on the track of slaughter; after that came a terrible epidemic of small-pox, which had scarcely abated when the plague broke out. Never in the history of France, perhaps of any nation, did misery in so many forms, and from such an array of disastrous causes, prey upon an unhappy people. . In Paris more especially the horrors of foreign invasion, civil war, famine, and pestilence met with all the desolating power of a united force, and turned the gay, dissolute city into a vast charnel-house and cemetery. At one moment the number of persons dying of hunger, over and above the normal pauper population of the city, was twenty thousand. And there was no opposing power to stem this torrent of evils. The charitable institutions of the state were temporarily paralysed for want of money: some swamped utterly in the

general ruin, others on the brink of a similar fate; their financial resources being either stopped altogether, or so diminished as to barely keep them alive. It was a state of things resembling more the chaos created by an earthquake than the result of social and political catastrophes.

In the environs of Paris things were, if possible, worse. The villages where the troops had encamped were shorn of their inhabitants, and the few who had survived the plague were starving. At Orange not one human being remained to tell the sad story of its woes. In many places the air was foul with the stench of dead bodies putrefying in the houses and out of doors; whole populations had died, mown down simultaneously by the plague, by dysentery, and by hunger, and the corpses were lying where they had fallen, in their homes, or out in the streets that were strewn with them like a field after a battle. Into these fearful pest-houses Mlle. Legras came with her companions in the wake of Saint Vincent and his priests, the latter digging graves, not separate ones, but wide trenches to hold “scores of bodies together”; and while their stout arms were busy at this manual work of mercy, the white cornettes came and went, like doves fluttering about a charnel-house, and strove to give some touch of decency and reverence to the dead who were being consigned to their tardy grave.

The heroic courage which endowed them, even physically, with a strength that seemed super-human, drew the eyes of not alone France but Europe on the Filles de Charite, and made other nations long to transplant to their soil this plant of rare and precious growth. Amongst those most envious of the treasure was the Queen of Poland, Louise, daughter of the Due de Nevers, who in her youth had been a Dame de Charite at the Hotel Dieu, and seen the Filles de Charite at work there. War was raging in her husband's kingdom savage war with Cossacks and Tartars, compared to which

the slaughter of French and Spanish troops was humane; the passage of these barbarian soldiers was followed, as slaughter seems always to have been in those days, by the appearance of the plague, and so fearful were its ravages, unchecked by the aid of medical skill or the organised efforts of charity, that four hundred thousand souls perished in the kingdom. The Queen, appalled at the miseries of her people, sent out a cry of despair and supplication to Mlle. Legras for help. The latter was appalled, at first, at the idea of sending any of her children such a journey, to a country where they knew no one, and where they would only hear a strange language. But after the first natural recoil, her charity rose up to meet the call upon it. Saint Vincent approved of her sending some of the Sisters, and when the proposal was made to them there was such a unanimous offer for the perilous mission that Louise felt satisfied the spirit of charity had inspired the demand. “Oh! my children, what a grace is your vocation!” she exclaimed, moved with thankfulness to the very core of her heart; “who shall describe it! Not the angels: only God Himself may do it. May His mercy grant you the blessing which reaches, not from west to east, but from time to eternity!”

Three of the strongest and most devoted were chosen from amongst the crowd of generous candidates, and, with many tears, and lingering embraces from Louise, and tender blessings from Saint Vincent, they set forth on the journey, fraught then with perils and fatigues that we can scarcely realise in these days of rapid and comfortable locomotion. They reached Warsaw in safety, and were welcomed by the Queen as ministering angels sent to her assistance. She would fain have kept one of the three near her own person to be her companion in the daily acts of charity which made her a model Christian queen; but, like Marie Denyse with the Duchesse d Aiguillon, the daughter of Saint Vincent burst into tears, and said she had left her country and her kindred

to serve the poor as a poor servant, and not to be the companion of royalty. The Queen let her go, and she soon after won the crown of martyrdom in attending the plague-stricken population of the city.

The war-dogs were soon again loose, and spreading death and desolation over the land the armies of Russia and Sweden fighting for Poland like wild beasts over a prey; and here on these distant battle-fields we see for the first time the Sisters of Charity present amidst the din and slaughter of contending armies. It is no novel sight now; we have grown used to it. Just as certainly as the eagles come after the dead bodies, so certainly do we look for the white cornettes where wounds and suffering are. But in the seventeenth century it was a spectacle that made the world stand aghast with wonder and admiration.

What, we may ask, were three valiant women amongst so many, and with such a work to be done? They were the beacon lights that called others to arise and follow to the rescue; they were the pioneers who went before into the unexplored land of danger and death, and drew multitudes of generous souls after them, as the magnet draws the iron.

The fact of their presence on the field of battle was made known to Saint Vincent through King Charles-Gustavus, who, lost in admiration at the sight, wrote to tell a brother prince in Paris what wonders these humble Frenchwomen were performing before the assembled peoples.

“I am going to tell you something that will give you great joy,” says the Saint, hastening to pass on the news to Louise. ” Whoever heard the like women having the courage to go into the midst of armies! Filles de la Charite, from the house in Paris, opposite Saint Lazare, going to dress wounded men, not in France only, but in Poland! . . . Did you ever hear

anything like this before that maids went out to battle-fields on such an errand? For my part I never did."

When the little band of Sisters returned to Warsaw, the Queen founded a hospital and placed them in charge of it, and, stimulated by their example, went there daily herself, as did the ladies of her court, to help them in serving and tending the sick. Soon after this we see Anne of Austria begging Mlle. Legras to send some of her Sisters to attend the soldiers who had been wounded at the siege of Dunkirk.

Hearing marvellous accounts of their self-devotion and the ability they displayed in dressing wounds, etc., Saint Vincent, again elated like a fond old father, writes to Mlle. Legras, "Did you ever know the like? For me, I know not of any confraternity that has done the things that God is doing through yours."

Two Sisters died at Calais of an infectious epidemic caught in attending the soldiers, and no sooner was the fact made known in Paris than twenty volunteered to fill up the vacancies.

But much as Saint Vincent and Mlle. Legras rejoiced to see the Filles de Charite ready to carry their services far and wide, it became at times necessary to refuse the demands made for them. Those engaged in the hospitals were so over-burdened as to be themselves compelled to call out for mercy or for assistance. One of them, writing to Mlle. Legras, declares that she and her companions must break down unless relief is sent to them. "I am obliged to write these few lines to you at night," she says, "while sitting up with the sick, and going between times from one poor dying man to another. I go to one and say, My friend, lift up your heart to God; throw yourself on His mercy. That done, I come back and write a few lines. Then I run to the other, and exhort

him, Jesus! Mary! My God, I hope in Thee! and back I come to my letter. In this way I write to you, with constant breaks, and with my mind terribly distracted. … I pray you humbly to send us another Sister!”

How few the labourers were in face of the harvest that was whitening on every side! And yet so boundless was their good will that every fresh field opened to them found them ready for the service, with its increased toil and difficulties.

Five-and-twenty years had Louise and her companions now been working together. They had come to be recognized as one of the great forces struggling against evil as one of the blessings of the age, raised up by Providence for its relief. Their energies had reached out to every department of human misery and pain and weakness; they were serving convicts in the hulks and in the prisons; they were tending sufferers in the hospitals, in the slums, in the madhouses; they were to be found on battle fields; they were as ubiquitous as charity itself; and their Confraternity had developed to this point without having received a Bull from the Holy See recognizing them as a regular community, and approving their Rule, and appointing their ecclesiastical superiors. Mlle. Legras had, as we have seen, obtained the blessing of the Pope, by stealing a march on Saint Vincent; but no more distinct official approbation had followed. Saint Vincent still hesitated about naming the Fathers of the Mission perpetual directors of the community, though he tacitly conceded the point. Louise, at last, determined again to take the matter into her own hands, and enlisted the influence of the Queen for the furtherance of her arm. Anne of Austria wrote to the Holy See, imploring its solemn protection on this society of “village girls, who style themselves servants of the poor, and who are trained to this office by a virtuous widow.”

Saint Vincent, finding that the virtuous widow had again circumvented him, surrendered at last, fully and with a good grace. He drew up a petition to the Holy See, asking for its sanction on the Society and its Rule, and for the nomination of the superiors of the Mission as superiors of the Filles de Charite. He entrusted this document, to Cardinal de Retz, who forwarded it to Rome. In due course he received an answer. It came on a gloomy winter's morning, the 16th of January 1655, but never in brightest midsummer did the sun so illuminate the earth, for Mlle. Legras and her Sisters, as on that day when Saint Vincent walked in with the letter from Rome, and told them of its contents. Only a few were present, so it was decided that he should come the next day and read it to the assembled community. You may be sure that no one was absent. They were all too eager to hear the good news to hear what his Holiness the Pope said to them. What he said was almost too grand to be true of such as they. These Marthas, who for a quarter of a century had been coming and going through the desolate places, associating with sinners, yet untouched by scandal, busy with much serving and careful about many things for those whom none had cared for, were now admitted within the sacred circle of the Marys who had chosen the better part, and knelt at their Lord's feet in the silent life. The white cornettes that in the broad light of day went boldly forth, penetrating to every den where vice and suffering and foulest peril to soul and body congregated the white cornettes were promoted to a place amongst the veils! They were to sail in their own special bark, piloted by their own captain, along with the grand and goodly ships that sail in the track of the Divine Fisherman, and cast their nets out into the deep at His bidding.

No wonder M. Vincent's voice shook, and that his eyes grew dim, as he read out the letter of the Holy See, and beheld the tears of joy that were flowing around him. The sister

servant, whom the Queen praised and whose generation rose up and called blessed, her daughters, the simple village maids whom she had taught to read and write and serve, could hardly believe that so great an honour had indeed been conferred upon, their humble little Confraternity, Louise was now an old woman, stricken with infirmities, wasted and weak, and suffering from so many ills that Saint Vincent had declared ten years before, ” her life is sustained by a miracle; and I know not how she lives, except by the force of Divine grace.” She had long been anxious to lay aside the burden of governing the community, and her hope was that a new Soeur Servante would be appointed as soon as the Holy See nominated the Fathers of the Mission to direct it.

The first article of the statutes ruled that “the Sisters would elect from amongst them selves one to be superior for three years; that this same one might be re-elected for another three years, but not for a longer term.” Louise drew a breath of relief as she heard this clause; but Saint Vincent added, after a moment's silence, “This, bien-entendu, will only come into force after the death of Mademoiselle.” Louise fell upon her knees and implored him not to set aside the rule, but to let her resign into worthier hands the trust she was no longer fit to hold. A murmur of counter-supplication rose from all present; and Saint Vincent, smiling compassionately at Louise, who was bathed in tears, raised her from the ground. “No, no,” he said; “you must not leave them yet. It is God s way to preserve by extraordinary means those who are necessary to the fulfillment of His designs; and, if you consider, Mademoiselle, for more than ten years you have ceased to live, at least in the ordinary sense of living.”

Vanquished by obedience and by the joyful acclamations of her Sisters, Louise bowed her head and remained silent, while Saint Vincent continued to read the statutes. They

ruled that the members were henceforth to bear the name of “Sisters of Charity, Servants of the Poor.” “What a beautiful title, and what a beautiful office!” exclaimed Saint Vincent; “it is as if you were called servants of Jesus Christ!” He reminded them that what for five-and-twenty years they had been doing of their own free will, they were now to do with all the more zeal, because it was enjoined them by a Rule sanc tioned by the Holy See; and after a fervent exhortation to them to love the poor and to remain always themselves poor and humble and obscure in the eyes of the world, he asked their pardon for all the faults he had committed in their service. “I will not pronounce any blessing to-day,” he said, ” because all these faults make me unworthy to do so; I will ask Our Lord Himself to bless you.” He knelt down and kissed the ground in sign of humilia tion. Whereupon Louise and her Sisters, moved to tears by the sight of his humility, knelt too, and entreated him to bless them according to his fatherly custom. After a while he consented, and lifting up his hands he pronounced in Latin, with extraordinary fervour, the solemn formula of benediction, “May the blessing of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost descend and rest on you for ever! Amen.”

After this touching and memorable conference, a deed was drawn up and signed by Louise de Marillac (Mlle. Legras) and thirty of the Sisters “who had learned to write,” and finally by Vincent de Paul, who sealed it with the seal of the Mission, a figure of Christ, with His arms outstretched.

The old Saint, now in his eightieth year, continued to gather the Sisters of Charity around him as usual for the weekly conference, and discoursed to them in accents of melting eloquence of the love of God and the sweetness and glory of their vocation, and the blessedness of serving the poor. He would turn now and then to Mlle. Legras his dear furrowed face, that wore the candid smile of a little child, and humbly

ask if ” Mademoiselle was of this opinion,” inviting her observations, and often putting her humility to a severe ordeal. It was not surprising that under such a master Louise learned to speak of the things of God with an eloquence that moved hearts. People said that “she spoke like M. Vincent,” with the same force of conviction, and simplicity, and unction. Her exhortations to the community breathed the spirit of Saint Vincent in every word; there was the same plain, wholesome wisdom, the same utter disinterestedness, the same horror of worldliness, the same tender compassion for the poor. She continually reminded the Sisters that they were not to fancy themselves nuns any more now than before the Holy See sanctioned their “little Confraternity “; they were sisters and servants of the poor, and never could be anything else. Amongst the many things she recommends to them, none recur more frequently than cheerfulness. She who in her youth and strength had been subject to “a certain sensitive melancholy,” that Saint Vincent had always fought against, was now in her suffering old age the gayest of the gay. She was the life of the community at recreation, holding her sides with laughter when some Sister told a funny story or made a comical repartee, and “laughing till she cried” while a raw young country girl went blundering with her through a spelling lesson. “Let us be merry! let us serve God with a gay heart!” was the constant cry of her whose body was one pain from head to foot, and whose days were spent amidst every species of misery.

The spirit of poverty and simplicity presided over the spiritual as well as the material with Mlle. Legras, and she would have the whole library of a Sister of Charity consist in The Imitation of Christ and a couple of prayer-books. The Rule demanded no dower with the Sisters, and we have seen how uncertain were the resources of the community; yet Mlle. Legras by her admirable government had brought it to

its present expansion free from debt and in dependent. “You could hardly believe,” writes Saint Vincent, not long before her death, “to what an extent God blesses these excellent women wherever they go.”

But the time was at hand when she who had planted this great tree was to be called to her rest Five years had elapsed since the great event of the Bull from Rome. The miracle to which Saint Vincent ascribed her prolonged life was more wonderful than ever; her body was reduced to a mere shadow, and, despite the supernatural strength that upheld it, it fell at times from sheer exhaustion and inability to hold on its way. She was wasted with low fever, and by the barbarous remedy of bleeding which was continually applied to relieve it. Louise bore all these sufferings with the sweet gaiety of a child; the only thing that troubled her peace was the fear that she should die without having Saint Vincent present to help her. Every suffering, every sacrifice, seemed light compared to this one.

Saint Vincent, now eighty-five years old, had grown very feeble, and though he continued to observe the Rule of the community, rising at four, and fasting rigorously, he was no longer able to come down to the parlour for the weekly conferences. He walked with difficulty, leaning heavily on a stick; and though his words were as impressive and glowing as ever, his voice was so faint as to be barely audible. He looked like a lamp that was burning out its last drop of oil.

Louise had been watching with prophetic fear these evidences of failing power, and when the moment came for her to lie down to die, she knew her fate; she knew that she would be called upon to make the sacrifice she had dreaded above all others. In the beginning of her illness she kept writing little notes from her sick-bed to Saint Vincent, asking for his blessing and for advice in her direction of the

community, etc. At first he answered them, but after a while, mindful more of the perfection of her soul than the consolation of her heart, he ceased to write, and only sent her verbal answers. Louise accepted the trial with her wonted gentleness, and in one of her last notes to him she says, “I accept all for the love of God and in the way He ordains. … It seems to me that Our Lord enables me henceforth to bear everything in peace.”

And yet many anxieties were weighing heavily on her heart. Her children in Poland were in grievous trouble. War had compelled them to fly to Germany, and they were there without home or protection. She was continually praying for them, and offering up her sufferings in their behalf. These sufferings were very severe, at times terrible even to witness; but they never drew from her a word of complaint; nor would she allow that she deserved any pity. “It is just,” she would say, “that pain should abound where sin has abounded. God is just, and He is merciful even in His justice.” When her Sisters expressed their sorrow at her being deprived of the consolations of Saint Vincent's presence, she replied that she was only too thankful to have this sacrifice to make to God, adding, “It is the one agreeable thing I now have to offer Him.”

When the end was supposed to be at hand, Michel came to her with his wife and child, and she blessed them tenderly, praying God Himself to bless them and detach their hearts from this world, so that they might live and die like true Christians. They knelt by her bedside, with the community, while Extreme Unction was being administered. But the end was not yet so near. After the last rites she rallied, and again made a general confession to the Abbe Gobillon, and lingered for another month. Feeling that the hour was then come, she sent to Saint Vincent to ask for a blessing and a word of encouragement written in his own hand; but Saint

Vincent would not have any human touch come to mar the perfect purity of her sacrifice. “Tell her,” he said to the Abbe Gobiilon, “that she is only going a little while before me. I hope soon to meet her in heaven.” The Abbe was pained to inflict this last disappointment on her, knowing how anxiously she was hoping for the written message; but Louise smiled, and seemed quite content when he told her what Saint Vincent had replied.

The Sisters of the Foundling Hospital came to get a last blessing, and she gave it to them with great fervour, repeating the words that she had spoken again and again during her illness to her children. “Be diligent in serving the poor. . . . Love the poor; honour them as you would Christ Himself, my children.”

The Abbe Gobillon, thinking that the moment was come for applying the plenary indulgence which had been granted to Louise years ago by the Pope, was about to pronounce the formula, but she made a sign to him to wait, and murmured, “Not yet!” Presently she said, “Now it is time.” The indulgence was applied, and after following the prayers with great devotion, she became silent, her soul seemingly absorbed in the thought of God. From this contemplation she passed softly into His presence, falling asleep like a child. When it became evident that she had breathed her last, the Abbe Gobillon exclaimed, “Her soul has carried its baptismal innocence unstained to the presence of God.”

The grief of the public that crowded to see her body proves what an opinion was entertained of the holiness of the humble servant of God. She was interred in the Chapel of the Visitation, and the Abbe Gobillon bears witness to a miraculous incident at her tomb, which was testified to by hundreds of trustworthy persons at the time. There arose from the tomb a cloud which exhaled a perfume like violets

and iris, and so strong was this delicious fragrance that those who prayed on the tomb while it lasted carried it away in their clothes, the Sisters taking it thus to those who were sick in the infirmary. “I may add,” says the Abbe Gobillon, “that after having taken all possible precautions to examine if this was not the effect of some natural cause, I have failed to discover any to which it can be attributed.”

Louise died on the 15th of March (1660), and it was not until the end of July that Saint Vincent was able to gather her sorrowing children round him, and speak words of comfort to them. The meeting was solemn as a last farewell. Saint Vincent was himself a dying man, and they felt this was probably the last time they should see him in their midst. He was too feeble to stand, and when he strove to speak his voice trembled and broke into weeping. With a great effort he overcame his emotion, and called up the elders among Mlle. Legras companions to say what they had ” witnessed of the virtues of this great servant of God.” One by one they stood forth, and, struggling with their tears, bore witness to her humility, her love of prayer, her love of poverty, her love of the poor. At some more than usually beautiful example of her tenderness for the poor, Saint Vincent would raise up his hands and give praise to God. When all in turn had spoken, he said a few words, and blessed the community, and they passed out from his presence. It was not long before he rejoined in heaven her who had shared and solaced so many of his labours on earth.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the book *A Heroine of Charity and A Queen by Right Divine* by Kathleen O'Meara, published in London, England in 1912.

For more free ebooks, other material about Saint Louise, or thousands of other saints and beati of the Church, come see us at -

CatholicSaints.Info

** or **

CatholicSaints.Mobi